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## My Fellow Blogging Americans: Weblogs and the Race for the White House

Nancy Snow

Which came first, the blog or the political campaign? It's the twenty-first-century version of the chicken or the egg dilemma. The race for the White House in 2008 was a clear point from which social media unsavvy presidential candidates need not return. As often as we got the daily horserace numbers on who was up or down in the polls, we heard electronic media stories about John McCain's aversion or inability to send personal e-mail in contrast to Barack Obama's obsessive texting that led to his post-election BlackBerry Withdrawal Syndrome. In July 2008, as Obama was gearing up for his world tour that included stops in Germany, Afghanistan, and Israel, the *New York Times* conducted a lengthy interview with Senator McCain that asked him a series of questions, including an emphasis on his social media skills set. When asked what electronic technology he uses, McCain responded:

I use the Blackberry, but I don't e-mail. I've never felt the particular need to e-mail. I read e-mails all the time, but the communications that I have with my friends and staff are oral and done with my cell phone. I have the luxury of being in contact with them literally all the time. We now have a phone on the plane that is usable on the plane, so I just never really felt a need to do it. But I do—could I just say, really—I understand the impact of blogs on American politics today and political campaigns. I understand that. And I understand that something appears on one blog, can ricochet all around and get into the evening news, the front page of *The New York Times*. So, I do pay attention to the blogs. And I am not in any way unappreciative of the impact that they have on entire campaigns and world opinion.<sup>1</sup>

McCain said that he read his daughter Megan's blog, among others. It was this admission that McCain did not use e-mail that was seized by the Obama

campaign. In September 2008, the campaign released "Still," a popular YouTube video that included 1980s era disco balls, oversized cordless phones, out-of-date eyeglasses and suits, and a Rubik's Cube. The ad copy referenced the *Times* interview:

1982, John McCain goes to Washington. Things have changed in the last 26 years, but McCain hasn't. He admits he still doesn't know how to use a computer, can't send an e-mail, still doesn't understand the economy and favors \$200 billion in tax cuts for corporations, but almost nothing for the middle class. After one president who is out of touch, we just can't afford more of the same.<sup>2</sup>

On September 12, 2008, Obama spokesman Dan Pfeiffer told the Associated Press: "Our economy wouldn't survive without the Internet, and cybersecurity continues to represent one of our most serious national security threats. It's extraordinary that someone who wants to be our president and our commander in chief doesn't know how to send an e-mail."<sup>3</sup> Another spokesman, Nick Shapiro, defended the ad even further:

The ad goes directly at the fundamental issue in this race: John McCain is out of touch with the American people and unable to address the challenges facing the country in the twenty-first century. It delivers the message in a light-hearted, humorous way that Americans can relate to. The overwhelming majority of Americans of all ages use computers today.<sup>4</sup>

The message was simple: Obama is tech-cool and McCain, war hero or not, is a computer illiterate who has not updated his suit or his technical knowledge since the twentieth century. It was part of an aggressive two-month offensive push by Obama's advisers to put the senior senator on the defensive. "Today is the first day of the rest of the campaign. We will respond with speed and ferocity to John McCain's attacks and we will take the fight to him, but we will do it on the big issues that matter to the American people."<sup>5</sup> To Obama's supporters, this aggressive move in the political chess game was a relief from what some saw as a too-passive Democratic presidential candidate. To Obama's detractors, the campaign ad and critical words about technical illiteracy spoken by Obama spokespeople smacked a bit of ageism, a charge that had not been a major feature in the presidential race for the White House.

Within a short time, conservative bloggers like Michelle Malkin's *Hot Air* and Jonah Goldberg revealed that McCain did not disdain new media so much as have a war injury that prevented him from typing, much less raising his arms. *Hot Air*'s Ed Morrissey posted:

Making fun of a war hero's severe injuries—smooth move, Team O. Talk about computer illiteracy! Doesn't anyone on the Obama campaign know what they're

doing? Didn't it ever occur to them that a man who can't raise his arms above his head might have a physical barrier to using a computer? If this is what happens when they take the gloves off, maybe they should just keep them on in the future.<sup>6</sup>

Jonah Goldberg blogged about McCain's physical limitations, pulling an excerpt from a 2000 *Boston Globe* profile by Mary Leonard.<sup>7</sup> Leonard's lengthy feature revealed a more personal side of the candidate when the Republican senator ran against then Governor George W. Bush of Texas in Campaign 2000.

McCain gets emotional at the mention of military families needing food stamps or veterans lacking health care. The outrage comes from inside: McCain's severe war injuries prevent him from combing his hair, typing on a keyboard, or tying his shoes. Friends marvel at McCain's encyclopedic knowledge of sports. He's an avid fan—Ted Williams is his hero—but he can't raise his arm above his shoulder to throw a baseball.

*Forbes* magazine also mentioned McCain's limited e-mail ability in 2000:

In certain ways, McCain was a natural Web candidate. Chairman of the Senate Telecommunications Subcommittee and regarded as the U.S. Senate's savviest technologist, McCain is an inveterate devotee of e-mail. His nightly ritual is to read his e-mail together with his wife, Cindy. The injuries he incurred as a Vietnam POW make it painful for McCain to type. Instead, he dictates responses that his wife types on a laptop. "She's a whiz on the keyboard, and I'm so laborious," McCain admits.<sup>8</sup>

If you wanted to be the last one standing in the race for the White House, you had better have nimble thumbs or have hired someone who was long in the information and communications (ICT) technology teeth. Lucky for Obama, not only was he generationally social media savvy at forty-seven, but he understood early on in his candidacy that the Internet universe, including an army of majority liberal bloggers, would be his close ally in getting out his message of just who is this guy.

For years, the old adage when one wanted to run for high office like senator, governor, or president, was "Where are you going to get the money?" Hereafter, the refrain must include, "Who is going to handle your interactive media?" And central to a candidate's interactive media is blogging.

As a blogger for the Huffington Post, it is not always easy to explain this part-time avocation. A blogger is one who keeps and regularly updates a blog, an online commentary site. The activity of blogging is for people who like to comment about either their own lives or about what is going on in the news,

post it online, and allow the world to comment on it. The difference between writing it down privately in a journal or diary is that one is logging this Web commentary publicly. While one can sometimes set one's blogs to be closed to comments (a feature offered to Huffington Post bloggers), this is generally frowned upon in the blogosphere (the world of blogging).

Long before blogging became part of our national conversation, there was the online diary. A person would update a Web site with information from his everyday life posted in sequential form or organized by reverse chronology. Many of these online diaries included references to one's daily meals or moods and were intended for friends or family more than a universe of readers. They were not viewed as part of the national conversation or seen as having much of any political influence.

Blogging, a shorthand version of vlog, keeps an online running commentary of one's happenings or events, often with hyperlinked pages to other blogs or Web sites. The term "vlog" is credited, with some debate, to Jorn Barger, who referred to "logging the Web" in December 1997 as opposed to just "surfing the Web" for information. His popular vlog, *Robot Wisdom*, is an eclectic collection of commentary from artificial intelligence to his favorite musicians like Joni Mitchell to writers Thomas Pynchon and James Joyce, about whose *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* he kept a vast annotated library.<sup>9</sup> A Jeremiah Johnson-looking figure, Barger says that his intent in 1997 was to "make the web as a whole more transparent, via a sort of 'mesh network,' where each vlog amplifies just those signals (or links) its author likes best."<sup>10</sup> Barger's style of blogging is more links-rich one-man band style like Matt Drudge's Drudge Report (circa 1996) as opposed to the graphic and video-rich Huffington Post (circa 2005) that boasts over a thousand bloggers. The Huffington Post's slogan is "The Internet Newspaper: News, Blogs, Video, Community," and unlike Drudge, who spotlights breaking news stories, the Huffington Post emphasizes its political commentary. *Time* magazine named it one of the top twenty-five best blogs of 2009, adding that "[W]hen it comes to political blogs, the Huffington Post is in a class by itself."<sup>11</sup>

The word "blogging" is credited to yet another father, Justin Hall, who was christened "the founding father of personal bloggers" in an article "Your Blog or Mine?" published in the noted newspaper of record, the *New York Times*. Hall began his links.net Web site in 1994 while a student at Swarthmore College. With over a hundred million blogging sites these days, the question of blogging paternity is hampered by a lot of chattering activity on the Internet and little attention to taking credit for whose first post created all this progeny. As CNET News staff writers Declan McCullagh and Anne Broache wrote: "Someone, somewhere created the very first Web log. It's just not quite clear who. . . . Any definition should probably include posts sorted by date, with

the newest posts at the top and the rest archived for future use (criteria that would eliminate the Drudge Report, for instance)."<sup>12</sup>

George Washington University professor Jeffrey Rosen, who credited Hall as one of the pioneer bloggers, says that blogging needs to be distinguished from professional journalism:

There are two obvious differences between bloggers and the traditional press: unlike bloggers, professional journalists have a) editors and b) the need to maintain a professional reputation so that sources will continue to talk to them. I've been a journalist for more than a decade, and on two occasions I asked acquaintances whether I could print information that they had told me in social situations. Both times, they made clear that if I published they would never speak to me again. Without a reputation for trustworthiness, neither friendship nor journalism can be sustained over time.<sup>13</sup>

In the United States, the concept of objectivity—factual and unbiased information—is closely linked to conventional definitions of journalism. Professional journalists are supposed to deliver "the facts" as Sergeant Joe Friday of *Dragnet* implored his female eyewitnesses. In contrast, political blogs have a slant or embedded bias to the way information is packaged and presented. Most blogs are characterized as left-leaning (Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo) or right-leaning (Michelle Malkin, TownHall) but loyal readers of these blogs often find them as reliable as mainstream news media.<sup>14</sup> A Brigham Young study by political scientist Richard Davis found a trend among political blogs that "liberals read almost exclusively liberal blogs, but conservatives tend to read both."<sup>15</sup> Further, liberal views dominate in the blogosphere (Huffington Post) whereas conservative views dominate on talk radio (Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly). Despite the recognized embedded bias in blogging, Richard Davis's research finds that blogs serve as a credible "echo chamber" for traditional news stories: "Blog readers still get most of their news from regular news sources, but they are concerned that they are not getting the whole side of the story there. They suspect habitual bias in the traditional news content."<sup>16</sup>

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, may have helped to fuel an interest in readers to get the other side of the story. In late 2001 and 2002, a number of sites sprouted up that questioned the government's version of the events of 9/11. Liberals who were upset with the Republican control of Congress and the White House were beginning to post their misgivings online, notably Joshua Micah Marshall of Talking Points Memo (talkingpointsmemo.com), who played a key role in pressuring Trent Lott to resign as Senate majority leader. In April 2004, Russ Kick, an Arizona-based blogger, used the Freedom of Information Act to request photos of American military coffins

coming back from the Middle East. The Pentagon sent the photos and Kink immediately posted the pictures on his blog, the Memory Hole (thememoryhole.org). Within twenty-four hours these photos were on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Bloggers were invited to both political conventions in 2004, and by the end of the year, the Merriam-Webster dictionary identified "blog" as the most searched definitional term. Political blogs came into play mostly for fundraising purposes during the presidential campaign season of 2004.

Democratic presidential contenders Howard Dean and Wesley Clark made use of the activities and endorsements of bloggers to raise their national profiles. Howard Dean's manager, Joe Trippi, attributed much of Dean's popularity and fundraising momentum to the Internet. The tipping point in blogging's influence on mainstream media occurred on September 8, 2004, when Dan Rather of CBS News reported on *60 Minutes Wednesday* a highly damaging story about President George W. Bush's credibility surrounding his National Guard Service during the Vietnam War era. Internet bloggers, especially Power Line and Little Green Footballs, seized on the cornerstone of the Dan Rather piece, a collection of memos that show favorable treatment of Bush. Though Rather dismissed his critics as "partisan political operatives" and referred to the documents as "fake, but accurate," doubts persist that the CBS News-obtained memos were produced using a modern font rather than a 1970s-era typeface. The whole episode was quickly dubbed "Memogate," or "Rathergate."

*Time* magazine named George W. Bush its "Person of the Year" for having retained his seat as president, but for the first time in its history *Time* named Power Line "2004 Blog of the Year" for the efforts of "three amateur journalists working in a homegrown online medium [who] challenged a network news legend and won."<sup>17</sup> In raising the visibility and credibility of blogs on the media landscape, *Time* explained the growing appeal of blogs to readers.

If you haven't read one, it's hard to describe what makes blogs so special. There's just something about the rhythm and pace of a blog that feels intuitively right. You don't have to sit through fake-cheerful news-team chitchat or wade through endless column inches. It takes about 20 sec. to read a typical blog post, and when you're finished you've got the basic facts up to the minute plus a dab of analysis and a dash of spin. If you're not satisfied, you can click the link for more. If you are, you can go back to checking your e-mail and jiggering your spreadsheets or whatever you do for a living. This is news Jetsons-style. If it were any nenter and quicker, it would come in a pill.

Many conservative bloggers consider the Dan Rather story as a liberal news media organization turning a blind eye to fact checking in its desire to unseat a Republican president. The industry magazine *Broadcasting and*

*Cable* reported shortly after: "Desire, ambition and haste—and, some would say, the blindness of anti-Bush journalists desperately wanting the story to be true—created the ideal conditions for a network to put its reputation on the line for a story sold with dubious goods."<sup>18</sup> Practically overnight, political blogs earned an immediate credibility in the eyes of many Americans while faith in mainstream media news declined. Today a blog called Rathergate exists to keep "an eye on liberal media bias." Despite the growth in blogs after 9/11 and during the presidential campaign season of 2004, a lot would change between the two campaign seasons. As Michael Kinsley points out, "Way back in 2004, when we last held an election, no one was complaining that there wasn't enough to see or read on the Internet. And that was before YouTube, Politico, Huffington Post, Twitter and Facebook became daily or hourly necessities for millions."<sup>19</sup>

By the conclusion of Election 2008, a quick look back revealed that Obama had an enormous new media advantage to that of McCain. Using data supplied by the online social media statistics firm Trendrr, Frederic Lardinois of ReadWriteWeb reported:

While overall blog mentions of Obama and McCain varied greatly during the last year (and we can't say if those were positive or negative posts), close to five hundred million blog postings mentioned him since the beginning of the conventions at the end of August. During the same time period, only about 150 million blog posts mentioned McCain (though it would also be interesting to see similar statistics for Governor Palin as well).<sup>20</sup>

This enormous blogging advantage that Obama had over McCain meant that the junior senator from Illinois was no longer an unknown also-ran in the presidential election. It signified that there was excitement—both positive and negative—about seeing Senator Barack Obama elected the forty-fourth president of the United States. These blogging statistics are astonishing when one considers that at the start of 1999 there were less than twenty-five blogs,<sup>21</sup> but by 2008, Technorati had indexed well over one hundred million worldwide.<sup>22</sup> The question remains: Did blogging make the man for the presidency or did the man for the presidency make blogging? That is not an easy question to answer definitively, but let's consider the political landscape that provided the content for the blogosphere.

#### THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

Before we put Obama into the genius campaigner column, let's admit that 2008 was much more likely than not going to be a win for the Democrats. An

unpopular war and even more unpopular Republican incumbent whose popularity by the end was barely out of the 20s spells change at the top. The race for the White House 2008 was the Democrats to win or to lose. This gave the eventual Democratic nominee an obvious advantage because the Republican competition—namely the social media disadvantaged John McCain—was not in the position of setting the agenda, but rather defending the indefensible. Add to this mix a Democratic nominee who offered even more change than just party affiliation and you had the recipe for grassroots participatory history making.

From the moment Obama uttered the words “Yes, We Can,” he essentially transformed his presidential campaign from his victory to our success. Voters were now in the driver’s seat of politics more than at any point in history. Yet how did a relatively obscure politician with the most liberal voting record in Congress unseat “heir apparent” Hillary Clinton and a Republican machine noted for its brilliant political strategizing? Obama emphasized brand management over traditional political strategizing, playing on the candidate’s natural personal and very positive appeal. We need not belabor the obvious powers of “Obamasuasion” or the fact that both Hillary Clinton and John McCain lacked comparable charisma and personal charm. Obama had inalienable communicative gifts. No other candidate, Democrat or Republican, had the personal “it” factor of candidate Obama, and Obama soon eclipsed the standard bearer communicator-in-chief of the Democratic Party, Bill Clinton. Further, Obama understood very well—more than Bill Clinton—that personal charisma, like credibility, is not about the sender of a message, but very much about the perceptions of receivers. No message, strategy, or campaign whistle stop was going to make a difference if voters were not buying what he was selling. And what he was selling was magic. He made the election about personal-level transformational politics and the possibility to end ideological stranglehold. Voters who were turned off by politics in general gave Election 2008 a second look because a mid-forties black junior senator with a funny-sounding name believed he could be president. And this served as a brilliant marketing strategy: Try it on for size. See if you like it. It wasn’t like a pushy salesperson, but more like someone who says “That’s fine” to your “I’m just looking.” Not only did voters respond to the man and his message, but also they donated. Of his \$639 million raised from individual donors, nearly half were donations of less than \$300.

Obama’s message was targeted to all, not just likely voters or past voters. In particular, first-time voters and independents were appealed to.<sup>23</sup> Everyone was given a chance to participate and ride the Obama train. No other political campaign had relied on so many millions of supporters, all of whom became fans of their candidate. Once they had buy-in, their loyalty was not only firm

but also enthusiastic. This is what a good brand does to build brand loyalty. A person who buys a Toyota for the first time is likely to keep buying that brand for years to come. Obama banked on his novice appeal with a pledge that he would deliver if buyers (voters) would just give his candidacy a test drive. This campaign pledge was “Change you can believe in.” It was simple, direct, and consistent throughout his campaign. He did not change anything in his message delivery, be it a new slogan or logo, which further reinforced his consistency and reliability. He never changed his message of hope and redemption (with their obvious Biblical overtones), and he combined these simple positive themes with specific policy details, all available online. He even served himself well in the three main political debates with Senator John McCain. By then, he did well enough that he did not lose any momentum and McCain had given up ground to Obama in the singular issue that became the floundering economy.

At the national level, the campaign strategy was “No drama Obama.” Obama relied on a small group of advisers who stayed on message with him. Obama was the face of the entire campaign. Everything was cleared through Obama and Obama was the spokesperson for his campaign more than his campaign advisers like David Axelrod, David Plouffe, Robert Gibbs, and Anita Dunn. Obama relied on his personal biography and powers of oration to inspire people to contribute to his campaign. If he had relied on political operatives to speak on behalf of his campaign, his personal message would have lost cadence. He also capitalized on the enthusiasm of the Democratic voters. While nearly two-thirds of Democrats (61 percent) responded with enthusiasm about the 2008 election, just 35 percent of Republicans felt likewise, all of which translates into a pull up/push down factor in fundraising and volunteer turnout. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in late June 2008 that just 45 percent of McCain’s supporters were enthusiastic about their candidate while 81 percent of Barack Obama’s supporters were. There was an obvious enthusiasm gap and money gap. The Republican money machine was in need of a major tune-up, but its negative messaging strategy to link Obama to radicals and socialists served only to turn off independents and first-time voters.

A major turning point in Obama’s political fortunes occurred at the lowest point in his candidacy. He had everything to lose and nothing to gain if he had followed the advice of his political advisers. But Obama decided that his campaign for the American presidency would be determined by his political instincts more than the advice of his inner circle. After his campaign suffered a beating from the around-the-clock news coverage of his controversial church pastor and spiritual adviser, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama elected to respond to all the criticism with a speech about race in America. His advisers told him not to respond and let the controversy die out. As Steve Kroft said

of the inner circle, "Like Obama, they were talented, laid back, and idealistic, with limited exposure on the national stage. But with the candidate's help, the team orchestrated one of the most improbable and effective campaigns in American political history."<sup>24</sup> This was a team that was in a race but did not make race an issue of the campaign. By the time Reverend Wright's speeches were being endlessly looped on television and the Internet, Obama asked his team to create some time in his schedule to give a speech on race. As his adviser David Axelrod recalls Obama saying, "I'm gonna make a speech about race and talk about Jeremiah Wright and the perspective of the larger issue. And either people will accept it or I won't be president of the United States. But at least I'll have said what I think needs to be said."<sup>25</sup> Obama's thirty-eight-minute speech, "A More Perfect Union," which he delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, has been viewed by millions on YouTube and was received by the major media as a political speech as memorable as the Gettysburg Address. It wasn't until after the November 2008 election that the public realized that Obama's inner circle was not with him on making the speech.

Obama's summer 2008 decision to opt out of public financing was a brilliant strategy in that it had no negative impact on his message of being a change candidate. In fact, electing to raise funds privately did more to underscore his political legitimacy than to question his backpedaling. Obama had originally agreed to public financing but when he saw how much it would restrict his ability to compete nationally, he took a risk, like his race speech, to do something truly extraordinary. He took a chance of being criticized by his campaign finance reformer opponent, John McCain. While McCain did criticize, the public took little notice or at least registered no negative feedback. Obama became the first president since 1976 to pay for his entire presidential campaign with donations and no government subsidy. He went for broke in a fifty-state strategy (somewhat pulled back closer to the election) with the idea that this time voters would go to the polls early. In Colorado alone, which normally leans GOP, he opened fifty-nine campaign offices to McCain's thirteen.

The Internet and social media allowed an individual to make a difference in a state outcome, both in the viral and fiscal strategy. Traditional electoral politics favor the battleground state approach with designated blue "D" and red "R" states where candidates compete. Obama played to a month-long strategy of voter turnout, running his campaign with over a million contributors and volunteers that were unmatched by his opponent. The Republican machine was still mostly a slow-moving RNC ship of state, not the nimble Obama train with its handful of top advisers and millions of "support staff." By Election Day 2008, it was estimated that one-third of all electoral voters

(35–40 percent) had already cast their ballots. This reality made it impossible for McCain to step forward with a message that would alter voter positions.

## CAMPAIGN TURNING POINTS

### The Media Became the Man

There is no question that the mediasphere was enthusiastic about the Obama candidacy and made a difference in the marketing of Obama's messages. Steve Kroft, a twenty-year veteran of CBS's long-running program, *60 Minutes*, profiled the candidate early on, when it seemed Obama had no chance of winning the nomination. No other candidate was followed so closely as Obama was by *60 Minutes* and after Obama's win, *60 Minutes* was quick to capitalize with a special commemorative edition of Obama's interviews.

Equally important was the merging of the man with social media and on-line outreach, both fun and user-friendly and serious enough to generate an online Obama universe. Obama Girl's "I Got a Crush on Obama" by satirists Barely Political was one of YouTube's biggest hits in 2007, eventually receiving over six million hits. Not created officially by the Obama campaign, Obama remarked about the video: "It's just one more example of the fertile imagination of the internet. More stuff like this will be popping up all the time."<sup>26</sup>

In early 2008, another turning point came in the form of yet another YouTube sensation. Jon Favreau, Obama's head speechwriter, was then twenty-six and crafted the "Yes, We Can" words that were not in the spirit of a protest song with negative context but were all about the positive. They reinforced Obama's positive messages of hope, reconciliation, and change from the bottom up. Hollywood soon followed. On January 8, 2008, Barack Obama gave a thirteen-minute concession speech. Within a short period, the speech was refashioned to a palatable YouTube-friendly four and a half minutes. The "Yes We Can" video was produced by hip-hop artist Will.i.am and shot by Bob Dylan's son, Jesse. Neil McCormack of the London Telegraph said about the video: "Although made without the Obama campaign's participation, Yes, We Can is an almost perfect piece of political propaganda, aimed at exactly the young voters who might be inclined to support a socially liberal black candidate but are often apathetic when it comes to actually turning up at polling stations."<sup>27</sup> It was shot in a few days and aired before the February 2 primaries. Will.i.am got the idea from the January 29 debate in Los Angeles. He was able to leverage the viral media effect of videos like "Yes We Can" and "I Got a Crush on Obama" without appearing officially tied to either.

On a more serious platform, enter Chris Hughes, creator of my.barackobama.com, or myBO, a Facebook replicant community for Obama enthusiasts. Hughes had gone to Harvard with Facebook creators Mark Zuckerberg and Dustin Moskovitz and had become the Facebook community genius. By the time Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007 in Springfield, Illinois, my.barackobama.com had announced its presence. Obama's prescient message, both virtual and literal that day, was that "this campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us. It must be about what we can do together." Over two million individual profiles of Obama supporters were created on the site and more than two hundred thousand organizational events took place offline. It was 2004's Howard Dean-like meetups on steroids.

From the start of his campaign, Obama wanted a virtual way for his supporters to build community but he did not know how to do it. He relied on the then twenty-five-year-old Hughes to do his own magic. It just so happened that by fall 2006, Facebook was allowing candidates to create campaign profile pages. Obama's rise to national prominence coincided with the rise in online community. Obama referred to Chris Hughes as "my Internet man."<sup>28</sup> John McCain and Hillary Clinton had nothing comparable, and Hughes would later become the online organizer in Iowa. The myBO group spawned many offspring, including an Obama Rapid Response Group to provide fact-based responses to negative media stories, particularly during the intense Reverend Wright period.

#### Iowa Caucus

Everything about the Obama campaign focused on winning the Iowa caucus on January 3, 2008. The key strategy with the Iowa win was to score an early knockout punch to other Democratic nominees and presumptive nominee Clinton combined with ground strategy to register new voters in record-breaking numbers. Just two weeks after the Iowa upset, all of Obama's major competitors had closed down their campaigns.

#### Testimonials

Though Hillary Clinton would squeak out a win in New Hampshire, she was lacking a celebrity political endorsement that could slow down the Obama train. Chicago resident and friend of Obama Oprah Winfrey gave a brand-to-brand endorsement in 2007, which made him the cooler choice, but he needed some political heavyweights. Enter some more magic in the form of the Kennedys. Ted Kennedy compared Barack Obama to his slain brother, John F. Kennedy, and Caroline Kennedy, not known to seek the spotlight, penned an op-ed published in the *Sunday New York Times* on January 27, 2008. One need not read

beyond the headline. It said simply, "A President Like My Father." Its message was simple, like the logo and the slogan: "I have never had a president who inspired me the way people tell me that my father inspired them. But for the first time, I believe I have found the man who could be that president—not just for me, but for a new generation of Americans." The next day at American University in Washington, DC, Caroline, Ted, and Patrick Kennedy stood together in support of Barack Obama. Ted Kennedy, the liberal elder statesman of the Democratic Party on his fifth decade in the U.S. Senate, was key to Obama's winning over the super delegates since the Kennedy name is of a higher stature than the Clinton name in Democratic Party politics.

#### Obama v. Clinton

The competition between Obama and Clinton helped Obama because it had a "celebrity death match" appeal to voters. Normally presidential politics are decided in a few months by about 1 percent of the electorate in early primaries and caucuses. Obama's early and unlikely win in the Iowa primary and even his setbacks in Texas and Ohio helped to keep the public interested. As Bill Clinton was able to market himself post-Gennifer Flowers as the "Comeback Kid," so could Obama earn his political stripes as someone with the energy and stamina to last through a grueling fifty-state contest. Voters had something that they often did not get in presidential primaries and caucuses: a real choice between a presumptive Democratic nominee and a challenger.

#### Look Presidential Before Becoming President

Obama's summer strategy was to keep his presence known, do not let up, and spend, spend, spend. In Virginia alone, another reliably Red state after it went for LBJ in 1964, Obama outspent McCain ten to one. McCain was forced to spend in a state that he thought was a shoo-in. Obama went on his early victory tour to Europe and the Middle East where he gave a particularly memorable speech in Berlin to hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic fans, another testimonial to the power of the candidate to appear like a rock star president before becoming one. Though he had already secured his nomination in June, by August there was a very public reconciliation with his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. It was she, the formidable opponent to Obama, who put his nomination forward from the convention floor of the Democratic Convention in Denver.

#### MOVING FORWARD, ONE BLOG AT A TIME

Today many Obama-themed blogs continue to flourish in the first year after the historic presidential election. They include This Week with Barack Obama



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23. David Plouffe on "Obama Campaign Strategy," *Obama Magazine*, 27 June 2008, [www.obamamagazine.com/latest-news/david-plouffe-on-obama-campaign-strategy/](http://www.obamamagazine.com/latest-news/david-plouffe-on-obama-campaign-strategy/) (15 July 2009).
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## Obama and Obama Girl: YouTube, Viral Videos, and the 2008 Presidential Campaign

Larry Powell

On June 13, 2007, the BarelyPolitical.com Web site posted a video on YouTube. Their independent production, "I've Got a Crush . . . On Obama," featured actress/model Amber Lee Ettinger lip-synching to a song while dancing in a bikini. One shot had Ettinger pole-dancing in the subway. Another featured her pining about her admiration for the Democratic presidential candidate while gazing at his photo—one that pictured him on a beach and wearing no shirt.

Ettinger quickly became an Internet star known as "Obama Girl." Her video became an Internet sensation, triggering more than three million views in the first two months. Before the campaign was over, it had tallied more than thirteen million views—double the best total of any of the Obama campaign's official videos.<sup>1</sup> The original posting was followed by a number of sequels featuring the same actress and character.<sup>2</sup>

The video was the opening salvo in an unofficial online campaign—unofficial because it had no direct connection to the Obama campaign. Importantly, it also signals a change in presidential campaigning. Television—the medium long considered the king of campaign communication—was now challenged by an online entry that had the potential to become a major channel for communicating with voters,<sup>3</sup> particularly young voters.<sup>4</sup>

How big was the use of the Internet in politics? Alessandra Stanley described the 2008 election as one "that changed the way we watch and drew new audiences . . . including younger people who mostly ignore the news and download their entertainment from the Internet."<sup>5</sup> Joe McGinniss<sup>6</sup> noted that while the Internet was drawing only a small percentage of advertising dollars, it was still having an impact—particularly among young voters. As Democratic consultant Will Robinson noted, "if you're under twenty-five you don't