

Yes, “We” Can

Politics of Inclusion in the Obama Campaign

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Three short words were emblematic of the United States 2008 presidential election. Three short words were called the “America creed” by Barack Obama himself. Three short words went from speeches to posters, from shouting to clothing, from singing in music videos right through to a declaration of a nation. Each of those three short words held a significant meaning of their own. With the United States in the middle of two wars and a global economic crisis, under the leadership of a government that lead with fear, the people were eager for a “change.” Senator Barack Obama appealed with a politics of “hope” that was evident by his use of the words “yes” and “can.” Furthermore, during the 2008 campaign he appealed with the politics of inclusion. Not just by paying it lip-service. Not just by a choice of words. Obama appealed with inclusion by enacting it at every level. Barack Obama had integrity with his use of the word “we” because he inspired a disenfranchised population to engage in changing their world. He achieved this using traditional and emerging communication, organisational and networking tools.

The two-hundred-and-twenty-year-old Constitution of the United States opens with just three words, “We the people.” However, the meaning of these three words has been changing in

recent times. Throughout the twentieth-century, the challenges created by the population boom and universal voting rights have been addressed by using broadcast media for political communication (McNair 2007, p5). However, the rise of the Internet, new media and information technology is providing a greater platform for inclusionary politics at a level that has never before been available. In March 2008, blogger Tim Leberecht announced, “Obama has introduced a new brand of politics, and he has caused a paradigm shift that goes beyond politics and marketing and may alter the very fabric of the American society: democratization with the means of the democratized web” (¶1). The 2008 presidential election set outstanding records for the usage of the Internet for campaigning, fundraising and voter interaction.

By June 2008, still five months before the election, 46% of Americans had already used the Internet, email or mobile phone text messaging to “...get news about the campaign, share their views and mobilize others” (Smith & Rainie 2008, p1). Obama’s best execution of his politics of inclusion was through the use of the Internet to connect to people and get them involved by contributing financially, directly partaking in the political conversation, creating user-generated content and interacting with online social networks.

Barack Obama brought many political neophytes into the political sphere for the 2008 election. His donor base was a “national force” reaching one million people by the primaries and 650 million dollars by election day – half of which were small donations (Davies 2008, ¶12; Slater 2008, ¶2). By June, one in ten of American Internet users had already used the Internet to donate money to a candidate (Smith & Rainie 2008, p6). The effort required to donate to a presidential candidate was lower than ever. Whereas financial contributors would previously have to attend a fundraising event or mail in a cheque, in 2008 all it takes is a credit card and few clicks. The commitment of a small financial donation was powerful for many supporters as it encouraged them to become involved. California working-mother Linnie Frank Bailey eventually became a pledged

Obama delegate and local campaign organiser because of the commitment of her ten-dollar donation early in the campaign.

Although the mainstream media has been the primary mode for political communication for a long time, Barack Obama and his supporters were able to communicate on a relatively inclusive platform by bypassing the mainstream media. Political blogs operate on a very uncensored and inclusionary platform. Their importance for inclusive communication was recognised by the significant number of bloggers that were being "credentialed to cover the party conventions" (Smith & Rainie 2008, p10). New media and longstanding broadcast media operate on different communication principles; we are moving toward the peer-to peer model and away from the one-to-many model (Jenkins 2006, p208). Throughout the campaign, the Obama's team used mobile phone text messaging (or "texting") to allow an easy mode of two-way communication on a platform that is native to the younger generations. Not only did texting allow people to ask questions such as "Where's my polling place?" but it was also used to announce important information such as Obama's running mate for vice-president (Vargas 2008c, p3).

Technologies like YouTube are fulfilling much of philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere where "Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, within the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions" (1978, p89). By June 2008, 33% of all adult Americans surveyed had watched at least one kind of political video on the Internet within the past few months; this translates to almost half the online population (Smith & Rainie 2008, p3). Barack Obama was supported by a proliferation of many independently developed videos such as "Obama Girl!" by *BarelyPolitical.com* (online satire company), "Yes We Can" by *will.i.am* (popular musician) and the vast range of user-generated videos that have risen to popularity. A survey of Americans in June 2008 showed that "...one-quarter have watched campaign-related videos that did not come from a news organization or the campaigns themselves" (Smith & Rainie 2008, p15).

With broadcast media increasingly revolving around short “sound bytes,” Barack Obama’s use of YouTube videos hearkened back to the era of the spoken word, smaller communities and deliberative politics (Gastil 2008, p96). For example, Obama’s thirty-seven-minute speech, “A More Perfect Union,” has been watched over seven million times over the last eight months, a significant feat in twenty-first century politics. There were thousands of videos by the official Obama campaign and the aforementioned “A More Perfect Union” still had over eleven-thousand comments from registered YouTube users. The bypassing of mainstream media, involvement of open public comments and the ease of user-generated content shows that using the Internet for the political sphere certainly brings it deep into the public sphere and makes the process inclusive.

Barack Obama introduced something new into electoral politics. For the first time in history Internet popularity significantly translated into movement on the ground. In her AlterNet journal article, writer Nancy Scola notes, “Facebook is revolutionizing the way collective political and social actions are organized today, blowing the doors off old models of how volunteer lists are amassed, funds raised, and messages honed and delivered” (2008, ¶2). Obama’s “We” politics can largely be understood because of his grassroots candidacy. His initial decision to run was largely influenced by a grassroots *MySpace* page that quickly attracted 160,000 supporters (Schiffers 2008, ¶17). Furthermore, a group on the social networking site *Facebook*, “Students for Barack Obama,” was created to encourage him to join the presidential race – over six months before he announced his candidacy (Vargas 2007, ¶4). During Barack Obama’s term as the Junior Senator for Illinois he set up profiles on various social networking sites such as *AsianAve.com*, *MiGente.com* and *BlackPlanet.com* to construct an approachable presence for Asian, Latino and black communities respectively. With as many as fifty profiles (one for each state) on some of the networks Obama was reaching out to all demographics and asking them to be involved.

However, Senator Obama’s inclusionary politics was hardly left online. Whether it originated from the Obama campaign or from grassroots groups, the online presence was a tool for offline

action. For example, Students for Barack Obama organised a rally with three-and-a-half-thousand students gathered at George Mason University before Obama had even announced his candidacy (Graham-Felsen 2007a, ¶1). Obama’s online presence had already mobilised over two million Obama volunteers by June 2008 (Schifferes 2008, ¶10). During January in San Francisco there were almost two hundred house parties for Obama, twenty-nine for Edwards and only nine for Clinton (Davies 2008, ¶25). The parties were a signifier of inclusionary politics and all the Obama parties were organised using online tools. Barack Obama’s campaign achieved an autonomous decentralised workforce of supporters through channelling communication and organisation through technology and social networks – his inclusionary politics walked the fine line between micromanaging and anarchy and he walked it with finesse (Norquay 2008, p60).

On the same day Obama officially announced his candidacy (February 10, 2007), the Obama campaign launched a social networking site, *My.BarackObama.com*, to communicate with his supporters and include them in the political process. The social networking tool empowered supporters to “...post blogs, organize fundraising drives, create offline meetings and link up with other supporters” (Graham-Felsen 2007a, ¶15). *My.BarackObama.com* contains hundreds of groups in the network ranging from “Environmentalists for Obama” through to “President Obama, Please Get FISA Right.” These groups brought average people into the political process by allowing them to be connected over a particular issue and influence the political stance that Obama will take. Throughout the presidential race Barack Obama’s campaign team contacted supporters in these groups and encouraged them to build community by calling people and hosting parties for members within the groups. This enabled the creation of community and familiarity between people with similar interests, demographics or geographic location that all supported Senator Obama.

Craig Newmark, was inspired to shift from his longstanding politically independent position to avidly supporting the Obama campaign. Newmark said the change was because he saw Obama as a leader, “A leader gets people to do things on their own, through inspiration, respect, and

trust” (McGirt 2008, ¶20). Obama appealed to an inclusive generation that demonstrated their desire to be included by their use of new media and interactive technologies. The inclusionary politics were neither a result of Barack Obama’s choice of words nor a construct of his campaign – they were a manifestation of grassroots support that not only reflected him as a candidate but were emblematic of the changing agenda of the country. Obama himself was even claimed to be a “mash-up, a (hyper)-text, a rich media (re)-mix of statements, tunes, vibes, opinions, and facts” – the remix of Obama is inclusionary politics (Leberecht 2008, ¶4). The kind of citizen interaction discussed in this paper exemplifies how Obama reached out to the people and made leaps toward Habermas’ notion of the public sphere (1978, p89). Barack Obama constructed a *movement* of “hope” and “change” in response to economic recession, a global environmental crisis, two enervating wars and an incumbent climate of fear (Jenkins 2008, ¶5). Three words were the creed of the Obama movement: “Yes We Can.” And they did, but as Obama reminded the American people during his victory speech, his candidacy is just the beginning – it is now the responsibility of the American people to fulfill their creed, “...pitch in and work harder and look after not only [themselves] but each other” (Obama, 2008).

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