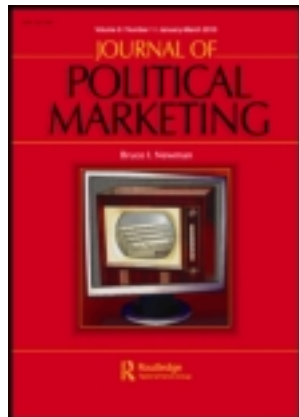


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### From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign

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# **From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign**

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*This article explores the uses of Web 2.0 and social media by the 2008 Obama presidential campaign and asks three primary questions: (1) What techniques allowed the Obama campaign to translate online activity to on-the-ground activism? (2) What sociotechnical factors enabled the Obama campaign to generate so many campaign contributions? (3) Did the Obama campaign facilitate the development of an ongoing social movement that will influence his administration and governance? Qualitative data were collected from social media tools used by the Obama '08 campaign (e.g., Obama '08 Web site, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, e-mails, iPhone application, and the Change.gov site created by the Obama-Biden Transition Team) and public information. The authors find that the Obama '08 campaign created a nationwide virtual organization that motivated 3.1 million individual contributors and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers. Clearly, the Obama campaign utilized these tools to go beyond educating the public and raising money to mobilizing the ground game, enhancing political participation, and getting out the vote. The use of these tools also raised significant national security and privacy considerations. Finally, the*

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*Obama-Biden transition and administration utilized many of the same strategies in their attempt to transform political participation and civic engagement.*

**KEYWORDS** *activism, political participation, presidential campaign, social media, social movement, virtual organization, Web 2.0*

“The *Internet* served our campaign in unprecedented ways”  
—President Barack Obama (Balz and Johnson 2009)

“I think we had *the perfect balance of new technology, old school organization*, faith in the people we hired, and trust they were going to get the job done.”

—Jim Dillon (Johnson and Balz 2009)

“... what began 21 months ago in the depths of winter cannot end on this Autumn night. This *victory* alone is not the change we seek, *it is only the chance for us to make that change*”

—President-Elect Obama (Barack Obama’s acceptance speech 2008)  
(*emphasis on all added by authors*)

## INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2009, Senator Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States. His somewhat unlikely journey was aided nearly from the inception of his insurgent campaign by the use of advanced social networking techniques and interactive Web 2.0 technologies. While other campaigns on both the Republican and Democratic sides used some of these same technologies, the approach taken by the Obama ‘08 campaign took these approaches to an unprecedented level.

### Historic Elections? An Overview of Previous Information and Communications Technology Use in Presidential Campaigns

There are political, technological, economic, racial, and cultural aspects to the historic nature of the 2008 elections (Todd and Gawiser 2009). We will focus, however, on the technological aspects, more specifically on the strategic deployment of a new generation of Internet-based information and communication technologies commonly referred to as Web 2.0 and social media (DiNucci 1999; O’Reilly and Battelle 2004). Even though many candidates in previous elections had used the Internet and social media in their campaigns, during the 2008 elections, Web 2.0 and social media were central to the campaign. Along with others, we claim that the victory of president

Obama is owed to a considerable extent to his integrated and strategic use of Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which made a substantial difference in the results (Fraser and Dutta 2009).

As we mentioned above, the Obama '08 campaign was certainly not the first to exploit information and communication technologies. As they became an increasingly important tool to achieve victory in political campaigns (Austin 2008), many candidates began to use them. For example, in 2000 Democratic Presidential Candidate Al Gore received instant communication via his BlackBerry moments before conceding to George W. Bush (Benbunan-Fich 2006). In the 2003 another democratic candidate, Howard Dean, preceded Obama by revolutionizing the use of Web 2.0 technologies in political campaigns. He introduced DemocracyForAmerica.com, which is credited as the first blog devoted to a presidential candidate (Chadwick 2008). Alexis Rice (2004), project director of campaignsonline.org, reports that as part of his Internet communication strategy in March 2003, the Dean campaign created numerous blog sites with sophisticated tracking features. Rice also reports the first official Dean blog (Howard Dean Call to Action) to have been created on March 14, 2003.

By 2007, candidates had recognized the role of user-centered and user-generated media; by this year, social networking sites such as Facebook already had 21 million registered members and generated 1.6 billion page views each day (Ellison et al., 2007). However, much has changed. According to Talbot (2008), 55 percent of Americans have broadband Internet connections at home (double the figure for spring 2004), increasing their ease of access to media-rich content online. Social networking technologies had matured, and people became more comfortable using them. According to Inside Facebook, a blog that traces the Facebook platform for marketing purposes, as of December 2006 there were almost 22,000 corporate social networks registered on Facebook (Smith 2006). In the 2008 presidential primaries, Democratic Senators Clinton and Obama announced their candidacies via videos online in the Web site of the Democratic National Committee. Internet users were ready and the campaign strategists knew it.

Given the tremendous potential that social media and Web 2.0 tools represented, candidate Obama decided to forgo public funding, which was an almost unheard of proposition for a Democratic candidate. His campaign team anticipated that through the use of social media they would be able to raise "enough funds" to win the elections (Hasen 2008; Klein et al., 2008). Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes was a key strategist behind Obama's social networking-podcasting-mobile messaging campaign (Stelter 2008). Though Obama wasn't the only candidate using social media, his strategy was planned and executed in a way that allowed him to gain advantage over the other candidates not only in the primaries but also in the presidential elections.

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategic use of Web 2.0 and social media tools by the 2008 Obama presidential campaign (Obama '08), and we address three primary research questions:

- (1) What techniques allowed the Obama campaign to translate online *activity* to on-the-ground activism?
- (2) What sociotechnical factors enabled the Obama campaign to generate so many campaign contributions?
- (3) Did the Obama campaign facilitate an ongoing social movement that will influence his administration and government?

## ORGANIZATION

To answer these questions, we will start by identifying our conceptual framework, which is based on an interdisciplinary review of the literature. We highlight the unique aspects of Web 2.0 and social media and what gives them the capacity to contribute to deliberative and participatory practices. We include an analysis of the characteristics of Web 2.0 that allowed the campaign managers to come up with new strategies. We then explain briefly our methodology for the study and move to an analysis of the findings. In our discussion, we will argue that the Obama '08 campaign ignited a new way to campaign for the presidency and elected public office not only in the United States but worldwide. We also anticipate changes wrought by this campaign to influence the way the new administration will organize government to interact with and engage its citizens.

### What Is New About Web 2.0? Implications for Social Capital

The term Web 2.0 is somewhat nebulous and certainly controversial. As we mentioned earlier, the founder of the Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, sees the concept as mostly “jargon” and argues that the concepts it embodies were included in the original approach to the World Wide Web (Shadbolt et al., 2006; Hendler et al., 2008). However, as the term has come to be accepted, it is defined by a series of characteristics and design patterns rather than by a specific concept. Tim O'Reilly, who more than anyone is given credit for popularizing the term Web 2.0, defines it as a set of principles and practices that tie together a wide array of sites that have user-generated content and make emphasis on social connections (O'Reilly 2005). This core “set of principles and practices” is applied to common threads and tendencies observed across many different technologies, and it is heavily defined by online presence (Madden and Fox 2006). Other authors argue that Web 2.0 is a force

that is reshaping the way we work; they even call it a “social e-revolution” (Fraser and Dutta 2009).

In terms of implications for campaigns, Gueorguieva (2008) argues that given the capacity of people to create their own content in Web 2.0, there is a risk factor that campaigns will reduce the level of control they have over their candidate’s image.

Some studies, contrary to predictions about the Internet diminishing human relations, found that online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other (Helliwell and Putnam 2004). In fact, high levels of social capital have been associated with Web 2.0 and social media (Backhouse and Canberra 2008). Building social capital requires a heavy investment of time and effort but in return increases commitment to a community and the ability to mobilize collective actions (Bourdieu 1986).

In a relatively recent study of social media and social capital, Ellison et al. (2007) found that use of social media was significantly associated with high measures of social capital. Specifically, they identified a direct relation between Facebook usage and “loose connections” or “diffuse networks of relationships from which they could potentially draw resources.” They found that the use of the Internet alone did not predict social capital accumulation, but intensive use of Facebook did. Similarly, Donath and Boyd (2004) argue that a positive relationship exists between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital, because it enables users to maintain such ties cheaply and easily.

Davis et al. (2008), in their analysis of the Internet in previous presidential campaigns in the United States, had projected the “unparalleled organizing power” of the Web and the possibility of bringing together total strangers. Web 2.0 and social media have the ability to decrease the cost of building large networks and in return can increase exponentially a person’s or organization’s social capital.

### Web 2.0 as Facilitator of the Public Sphere: Deliberative Spaces and a Public “Private” Life

In 2000, Castells predicted the network society to expand pervasively throughout all social structures and to transform political processes and social movements. As he forecasted, we have witnessed how politics has become increasingly played in the space of social media, how leadership has become personalized through the use of Web 2.0, and how political actors who do not exist in the power game through and by the media are being left behind. There are consequences to the nature, organization, characteristics, and goals of political processes, actors, and institutions (Castells 2000).

We have identified two aspects of the information society that could be fostered by Web 2.0 and social media. The first is the space that these tools provide for deliberative democratic processes, or public sphere a la Habermas (1991). The second is as an increasingly ubiquitous public “private” life and political life thanks to direct communication and expansion of networks facilitated by Web 2.0 and social media.

The Web in fact is regarded as a “deliberative space” that can be highly democratic (Chadwick 2008). According to Habermas (1991), information, citizenship, government, and the public sphere are interconnected through mass media. If we look at Web 2.0 and social media from Habermas’ public sphere perspective, we can regard them as facilitators of a deliberation space where people can exchange ideas freely. In this context, the term cyberdemocracy is introduced as a technocultural goal that intends to create a “healthy public sphere” by providing people access to political advice, analysis, criticism, and representation through communication media (Green 2002; Carroll and Hackett 2006). Any government that intends to provide this space to its citizens should have adequate infrastructure in place (Mayer-Schönberger and Lazer 2007).

Web 2.0 fosters a wider array of ways in which private and public life take place, thus making political life increasingly ubiquitous. Van Dijk (2006) argues that the social infrastructure and the new communication technologies are mutually shaping processes that create the new society. He discusses the blurry division of public life and private life. In his view, networks are connecting people directly and allowing activities that traditionally were possible in a particular domain to be done anywhere. We think that Web 2.0 and social media make possible these kinds of communication groups. Given its characteristics, Web 2.0 has a tremendous potential of empowering citizens and allowing them to effect change.

Though Web 2.0, social media, and the Internet have the potential to promote a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas et al., 1991), and authors such as Fernback (1997) go as far as regarding the Web as a “new arena for participation in public life” (p. 37), there are issues that should be considered by any “networked nation” regarding the limitations of Web 2.0 and social media as facilitators of social communication.

Fernback (1997) argues that the Web promotes an ideal public sphere due to the difficulty and complexity in regulating it; Cammaerts (2008) suggests that the fragmentation of Web 2.0 and social media is a limitation to developing a public sphere, because participants may become influenced by the relatively unknown market forces or they could undergo substantial levels of surveillance or censored by states and employers. Cammaerts (2008) also argues that the potential democratic process afforded by Web 2.0 and social media can be limited and appropriated by the elite. He points out that not only capitalism, but states, employers, or other established

elites can “erode the participative and democratic potentials of the Internet” (2008, p. 372).

### Fostering New Social Movements with Web 2.0

In this study, we will look at the Obama ‘08 campaign and the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools from the lens of two social movement theories: (1) the resource mobilization paradigm (RMP) and (2) new social movement theory (NSMT). The first could explain how the mobilization of resources in elections could have been facilitated by the use of information technology; the second helps explore the cause behind the mass mobilization of constituencies at the grassroots level. We will combine both in order to take into consideration not only the historical context but also the role of the information in society (Melucci 1996; Castells 1983).

The RMP alleges that new social movements have different characteristics than traditional social movements; it affirms that social movements are institutionally rooted, making the line between social movement and politics blurry. Participants of new social movements, according to this paradigm, are rational and their collective action is determined by the access and control groups have over the necessary resources for activism (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The RMP, different from other social movement theories that focus on formal organizational structures, focuses more on informal decentralized networks (Buechler 2000). The political process model articulated by McAdam (1982) presents three factors for the success of social movements. The first factor points to the structure of political opportunities, in other words, the capacity a group has to mobilize its members. The second factor is the “indigenous organizational strength,” which translates into the capacity of activists to organize. The indigenous organizational strength is a product of the interaction among leaders, members, incentives, and communication. The third factor is called cognitive liberation, which is the group’s awareness of their power to change a situation through their actions.

NSMT looks at politics, ideology, and culture as explanations for action (Buechler 2000); it is under this theory that it would be possible to characterize a historically specific social phenomenon such as the 2008 elections and the Obama campaign. This perspective also allows us to see the 2008 elections as a result of modernity, in this case the widespread use of information technology. From the NSMT, the social base of a movement could be originated based on social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or citizenship; thus, social movement causes are more complex than in the traditional view. NSMT ties the people’s identity (race, gender, culture, etc.) to their motivation to participate in a movement (Pichardo 1997). Another prominent theme in NSMT is the individual’s lifestyle as an arena for political action, where the private is no longer private and we make public our beliefs



and political points of view, thanks to what they call “invasive technologies” (Buechler 1995, 2000).

With respect to the role of information and communications technology, Garrett (2006, p. 15) states that they are “changing the way social movements mobilize, realize new political opportunities, and shape the language in which movements are discussed.” However, he found an emphasis on the mobilizing aspect of information and communications technology in social movements. Mobilizing structures refer to the mechanisms that enable individuals to organize and engage in collective action, including social structures and tactical repertoires (McCarthy 1996). Based on these perspectives, Garrett (2006) argues that if the organization infrastructure exists, supporters of a cause are more likely to participate.

## Campaigning

Now we look at literature on campaign strategies. We will present a consensus perspective around the basic elements a campaign should address. We will integrate this into our framework for analyzing the Obama ‘08 campaign. According to Shea and Burton (2006, p. 16) “Thoughtful campaign plans minimize uncertainty”; campaign plans exist to define the what, when, who, and what of a campaign. They also argue that the process of campaign planning and strategizing encompasses many issues and continues to evolve while maintaining its principles (Lee 2009). For instance, party identification has become less important, and candidates have to build an identity of their own; therefore, campaigns are designed incorporating pretested components to new needs, candidates, and constituencies (Shea and Burton 2006).

There are several key ingredients to a successful campaign. According to Shea and Burton (2006), the first ingredient is *understanding the context of the campaign*. This means focusing on the terrain in which the campaign will operate. To comprehend that terrain, the campaign should have a clear grasp of (1) voters’ expectations in terms of not only the issues around the candidate but also those around the candidate’s image and the tone of the campaign; (2) the kind of media relations they will establish. This includes gaining the right coverage, and preparing for press scrutiny as well as managing the unexpected (Newman 1994); (3) public interest in the campaign, which is very important as it is ultimately reflected on fundraising. Within the context of the campaign, it is also the (4) candidate’s background, history, and current moral and political position; (5) how the strategy may change according to the number and kind of players (e.g., the strategy for the primaries may not be the same as the strategy for the general elections); and (6) the election year and all its issues (the number of people voting will vary if it is an odd or even year election or if it is an “on year” or “off year”). Other contextual issues are (7) the national trend in terms of policies, values, etc.; (8) that the candidates running for other offices also have an influence on the

overall campaign and public perception; and (9) geography, community organizations, elected officials, political heroes and villains, social and political customs, parties and bosses, and local history. Complimentary to understanding the context, campaigns should also do their homework regarding demographic research. Campaigns should be able to combine theory from several measurements to understand the close relationship between demographic characteristics and the electoral outcome (Shea and Burton 2006) and incorporate it into their strategic planning. Demographics are a powerful campaign tool, as the goal of campaign is to target the right voters. In Shea and Burton's (2006) words, "getting to know the interests of persuadable voters . . . requires networks of operatives and activists who know the voters personally" (p. 43). As part of the demographic assessment, the campaign should know the candidates and opposition profiles by looking at records and collecting information on the opposition's candidate and organization. If used properly, this information can change the course of a race.

Another key factor to campaigning, according to Shea and Burton (2006) is *thinking strategically*. This involves understanding the past (prior electoral targeting) and its influence on the present. For instance, knowing what the electoral patterns are will help predict outcomes and knowing that "people who always vote Republican will probably always vote Republican" will be useful for making strategy. Also, using poll data to drawing information is considered one of the most important skills in modern electioneering, as well as building a strategy where the strategic positioning, campaign theme, and "win map" are clearly delineated.

As a third and very important element, perhaps the most researched according to Shea and Burton (2006), is the *voter contact technique*. They argue the preferred means of promotion are changing; the future of American political campaigns is strongly tied to the latest technology; "each electoral cycle brings new marketing tools" (2006, p. 199). Technologies such as Web sites and blogs reinforce a new style for electioneering and change the relationship between the candidate and the voters (Panagopoulos 2009).

One of the most important reasons a campaign would contact voters is fundraising (Hasen 2008). Campaign managers know that money provides an advantage in any race for public office and that soliciting "increases the chances an individual will produce a check" (Shea and Burton 2006, p.=139). These realities increase the importance of having fundraising strategies and tactics. The mere act of soliciting increases the possibilities of receiving more donations (Tucker and Teo 2008). According to Shea and Burton (2006), the first reason people do not give to a campaign is because they are not asked; the second reason is the amount asked is not specified in the petition. The third reason is lack of a clear way of giving.

There are different kinds of contributors, individual as well as group donors, such as interest groups. On one side solicitation makes donors feel

that they are needed and valued (Shea and Burton 2006); on the other side, interest groups are more likely to base their donations on policy grounds. Fundraising strategies have become increasingly complex, and they include personal solicitation, political action committee (PAC) and groups solicitations, direct mail, events (big and small), telemarketing, and online fundraising. Online fundraising in particular provides several benefits; one of them is the possibility of raising big amounts of money at a relatively low cost. According to Shea and Burton (2006), it was in 2000 that the credibility of the Internet as a fundraising tool was established, when John McCain raised \$1 million through online efforts. This credibility was enhanced in 2004, when Howard Dean was able to raise \$14.8 million in just 3 months. Recommendations for effective use of Web sites in a campaign include creating a Web site using the latest technology, providing plenty of information about the candidate, promoting the Web site persistently, making the site user-friendly, making sure it is always up to date, publicizing offline campaigning efforts online, providing feedback mechanisms for any online contributions, encouraging friends to contribute online, posting the results of opposition research, and providing useful links (Smith 2006).

Another reason to reach the constituency is strategic communication. Deaver and Herskowitz (1987) argue that the campaign needs to find the right means and the right message for the segments of voters it is targeting. The means have evolved throughout, and Shea and Burton point out that “it’s important to be able discern the differences between paid media and earned media” (2006, p. 153) and orchestrate the media strategy in a coherent, consistent, efficient, and timely manner. Paid media, free media, and “earned media” strategies need to be treated differently according to their characteristics; for instance, paid media gives the ability to control their message, whereas earned media such as news coverage provides credibility. Today, the Internet as a medium is considered essential. Some earned media tactics include news releases, actualities and feeds, news conferences, media events, debates, interviews, editorial pages, and nonattributed information (Shannon 2007).

On the other side, a team of dedicated volunteers can help compensate for weak finances. This is especially true if it can support a well-financed campaign. Shea and Burton (2006) argue that there is big power in direct voter contact and that, contrary to belief that grassroots campaigning is obsolete, it is returning and is stronger than ever (Martel 1983). The Internet can facilitate grassroots involvement. Howard Dean started his Internet-based grassroots efforts in 2000, and almost 10 years later it should not be considered exceptional to use the Internet to generate volunteer support. However, the Internet should not be considered a “magic potion” that will motivate voters in and of itself. Shea and Burton (2006) do not predict online campaigning to revolutionize the electoral process, but acknowledge it will reshape some of its elements.

The Web is an effective vehicle to foster interaction between candidates and voters and to help organize grassroots activities. Grassroots activities include: canvassing, voter registration drives, absentee ballots and mail-in voting, literature drops, telephone banks, direct mail, e-mail and blogs (highly persuasive), coffees and handshakes, and get out the vote drives (Shadegg 1972).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on this literature, we have developed two conceptual frameworks that guide our analysis of the Obama '08 campaign as well as the first few months of his administration and the transition from a *networked nominee* to what we call a *networked nation*. The first conceptual model focuses on the role of Web 2.0 and social media in a presidential campaign. The second model helps to explain the role of Web 2.0 and social media on generating new social movements.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as an exploratory qualitative case study. Our goal was to identify the relevant categories and conceptual framework that would perhaps help to understand the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools in the Obama '08 campaign, to explore that framework with empirical qualitative data, and to lay the foundation for future quantitative studies in this area. As such, our goal was to collect as much qualitative data as we could from the various Web 2.0 and social media tools developed and used by the Obama '08 campaign.

Our primary data sources were the Obama '08 Web site (BarackObama.com), the Obama Twitter feed, the Obama Facebook site, the Obama MySpace page, e-mails, iPhone application, and the subsequent Change.gov and Transition.gov sites created by the Obama-Biden transition team. We also collected publicly available information about the campaign and candidate's personal use of mobile technologies and social media. We used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (in this case, QDA Miner) to organize and code the data. With the assistance of the software, we were able to compare key concepts in our conceptual framework with this digital corpus.

## KEY FINDINGS

We have organized our findings into three parts to correspond to our primary research questions. Each section will present the overarching finding

related to that question and then provide additional evidence and analysis to support the claim.

### The Networked Nominee: Web 2.0 and Social Media in the Obama '08 Campaign

Our first research question is, "What techniques allowed the Obama '08 campaign to translate online *activity* into on-the-ground *activism*?" Here, we find that the Obama '08 campaign used their Web 2.0 and social media tools not just as sources of information dissemination, which was still the dominant approach of most of the other candidates, but as a means to capture data about their participants and to build a geographically distributed virtual community.

Obama began using these technologies very early in his political career. In 2004, during his campaign for the US Senate, his grassroots activities were not only at the interpersonal level but also online. He used a personalized campaign Web site and blog that allowed him to reach voters with specific and sophisticated messages. He also organized "Obama communities" in targeted areas. Groups such as "Asian Americans for Obama" and "Educators for Obama" assisted in voter registration, fundraising, canvassing, etc. In 2004, he successfully used volunteer-based tactics to win his Senate seat (Shea and Burton 2006).

To create his online constituency, the campaign requested supporters' e-mail addresses, ZIP codes, and telephone numbers during the rallies. This allowed Obama'08 to have a large database of information about supporters and a direct line of communication with them. The campaign then used these tools to organize the geographically distributed actions of the campaign and coordinate them with their regional supporters all over the country. These social networks extended beyond the campaign offices and allowed staff, volunteers, and the public to stay connected. In essence, they focused on building the campaign into an effective virtual organization.

The core of the Obama'08 Web 2.0 strategy was its Web site (BarackObama.com). The site used Web usability principles strategically in order to achieve high participation. The site had a visual layout and color scheme that allowed easy "scanning"; it also used colloquial language that encouraged participation. The site had a strong component on donation. The buttons for donations were positioned in prominent and noticeable places. In fact, the "Donate" buttons were the easiest ones to find. The site was easily navigable; it oriented the user to effortlessly find information on how to get involved at the local level and on the campaign issues and how to connect to other people. The site provided a rich user experience, presenting content that allowed users to subscribe to news alerts as well as access information on ways to take part nationally and locally. It also facilitated access to user-generated campaign content such as blogs, social media,

events, and video. Obviously, the site was also filled with photos of the smiling candidate(s) and their families.

We found that the Obama '08 campaign had an international impact, influencing other political campaigns around the world. If the old adage is to be believed, "imitation is the most sincere form of flattery," the Netanyahu '08 campaign for prime minister of Israel must have had nothing but praise for the Obama campaign. The similarities between the Netanyahu site and the Obama site are striking (Bronner and Cohen 2008). The Netanyahu site also emphasized participation and facilitated involvement and easy access to campaign information and media-rich content, among other features; the layout and color scheme of the Netanyahu is a literally a mirror of the Obama site.

As we have suggested before, not only did the Obama '08 campaign have a presence on these social media, they developed strategies for using them to their full potential. One of the strategies of the campaign was to personalize the candidate and the campaign, to embrace individual supporters using the same technologies, and to make them feel a part of the campaign. The campaign used Facebook to organize, Twitter to send news, and YouTube to communicate. At one point during the campaign, then Senator Obama had the largest number of followers of anyone on Twitter (Rainie and Smith 2008). In addition, Obama '08 also used additional Web 2.0 tools like Flickr feeds to keep supporters updated with photos from the campaign. These tools were able to also help the campaign to segment out its supporters and to provide targeted messages to unique and narrow constituencies and slices of their activist base. Mealy (2009) has shown that this strategy was particularly effective in its outreach to ethnic communities (e.g., African Americans, Latinos, Asians) but also to class-based and other affinity groups (e.g., Teachers for Obama, Lawyers for Obama). Of course, the campaign had several issues of interest to make the media and public become interested, for example, the economy and the candidate's own ethnicity (Shea and Burton 2006).

We are not arguing that the Obama '08 campaign was alone in their use of social media. Other candidates certainly started to pick up and use Web 2.0 and social media tools as well. Boynton (2009) has shown how all of the candidates used YouTube, for example, to varying degrees of success. However, one aspect that made the Obama '08 campaign different was the central role played by these technologies in the campaign. When we compared Obama '08 to other campaigns, we found that no other campaign gave these social media tools such a central role. The media director for Obama '08 was one of the cofounders and original online strategy managers of Howard Dean's campaign, who rebuilt and consolidated what was started at the Dean campaign. They combined more features into the campaign strategy, such as SMS, distributed media, phone tools, and Web capacity to support campaign activities such as donating money, organizing meetings and

media events, distributing news, and offering actualities and feeds (Talbot 2008). The Obama campaign launched a revolution in the use of information and communications technology in politics (Borins 2009). In an interview with Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, he expressed: “The campaign, consciously or unconsciously, became much more of a media operation than simply a presidential campaign, because they recognized that by putting their message out onto these various platforms, their supporters would spread it for them” (Rasiej in Talbot 2008, p. 3). In addition to these major tools, a number of other social networking sites also entered the picture, including YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Eventful, LinkedIn, BlackPlanet.com, FaithBase.com, Eons, GLEE.com, MiGente.com, Batanga, AsianAve.com, and the Democratic National Committee’s Party-Builder (Greengard 2009).

Another important aspect of the campaign’s use of these tools was the candidate’s own use of the tools. Senator Obama was perceived as being personally comfortable using technology. During the campaign, he constantly used his BlackBerry and the other social media tools of the campaign. He was frequently seen walking and talking or texting, using SMS/texting to keep himself informed about what was going on in the campaign and to motivate others.

Finally, the campaign also used targeted and timely e-mail contact, frequently “sent” from the candidate himself at key moments (e.g., before going out onto the stage for an announcement of his vice-president pick). They used Web 2.0 and social media to provide citizens with information that would allow them to obtain advice, be critical, and be represented.

We can see how Web 2.0 shares the characteristics of the public sphere in which people can be media audience, authors, statesmen, rhetoricians, pundits, etc. From the social movement perspective, we can explain the use of Web 2.0 by the Obama campaign as a tool to reach and mobilize people and to build on social momentum. However, in addition to building communities, the ability to mobilize through the use of Web 2.0 and social media is perhaps one of the greatest fruits of the campaign strategy. We conclude this section by talking about community mobilization for political purposes, and in the next section we describe their mobilization for financial purposes.

The Obama campaign created and/or took advantage of the social capital that 4 million supporters could give them. The volume of the Obama campaign’s social capital can be measured by the number of “agents” and the size of the networks that can be mobilized (Bourdieu 1986). Bligh and Kohles (2009) indicated that through these multiple avenues—innovative, online social networking strategies and a broad volunteer network—the charismatic attributions of Obama became contagious.

One way of mobilizing these supporters was through a completely unique (among the candidates), innovative, and free application for the Apple iPhone. The campaign generated additional brand recognition for the

candidate, since the application was a constant reminder of the candidate whenever supporters looked at their screen. When the application was turned on, it would immediately respond with the following dialogue box: “Obama’08 would like to use your current location,” to which supporters could answer, “don’t allow” or “OK.” If they chose OK, the iPhone would use its GPS features to identify the supporters’ geographic location. The application would then use this information to identify relevant local political activities in which the supporter could immediately engage. These activities included things like phone banks, staff and volunteer meetings, policy briefings, news stories, and debate activities. The supporter could also use the application to sign up for e-mail updates and stay in touch with the campaign.

Another innovative feature of the application was the state-targeted phone support. In this feature, the application would search through the supporter contact list (users were assured that the data did not leave the phone). It would then segment the contacts by state—with a particular focus, it seemed, on battleground states like Michigan—and prompt users to call friends to talk about the candidate. It even kept a record of which contacts they had and had not called using this feature.

In summary, the techniques that were most significant to enable the Obama ‘08 campaign to translate online activity to on-the-ground activity included: targeted messages facilitated by social media and Web 2.0 tools, Web-facilitated hosted meetings, the mobilization of the Obama network of supporters, promoting active civic engagement, enabling peer-to-peer political campaigning, educating the public on issues and organizational strategies, enabling voters to make informed decisions, mobilizing the ground game, Web-facilitated canvassing and phoning, and raising money. In the next section, we will explore this final aspect in more detail. In short, the Obama ‘08 campaign was able to take old campaign strategies and transfer them to the Web 2.0 world to make them even more effective. In total, there were more than 2 million users of the Obama ‘08 social network and more than 200,000 offline events.

### Web 2.0 and Campaign Contributions

The Obama ‘08 campaign used their Web 2.0 and social media strategy to break all previous records for online fundraising. By the time it was all done, they brought in a record amount of nearly \$750 million for Senator Obama’s presidential campaign, exceeding what all of the candidates combined collected in private donations in the 2004 election (Luo 2008). So what socio-technical factors enabled this record-breaking achievement? One key factor was the persistent and personalized e-mails. The Obama ‘08 campaign was able to generate exceptionally timely and personalized e-mails. These e-mails would be sent with a variety of signatures, ranging from David Plouffe, the campaign manager, to Valerie Jarrett, John Podesta, Michelle Obama, and



of course the candidate himself, Barack Obama. These personalized e-mails would often come right before or right after a key event and were designed to make the constituency feel as if they were “there,” as if they were an “insider,” and personally “close” to the candidate. Each of these messages always included a very large and bright red “Please Donate” button. As we discussed in our conceptual framework, there was no hesitation on the part of the campaign in asking for financial support.

Many of these e-mail requests for donations included “special offers” (e.g., if you donated more than \$50 at that time, you would receive special Obama ‘08 items, such as a fleece jacket). These features also contributed to the feeling of being an “insider” in the campaign. Shea and Burton (2006) say that in the information age candidates cannot rely on personal relations alone; we found out that the Obama ‘08 campaign e-mails felt personal to the constituency. There were reports of complaints that suggested supporting Obama was taking a heavy toll on people’s inboxes (Rolph 2008); some argue that “. . . the flurry of fundraising e-mails had some subscribers pleading for a break from the solicitations and raised questions about whether Obama has figured out how to harness the power of his online network once in the White House.” (Vogel 2008).

Finally, as Gueorguieva (2008) argues, controlling the candidate’s image was challenging thanks to the capacity people have to create their own content in Web 2.0 technologies. The Obama ‘08 campaign hit fundraising “hard times,” several times, especially as the McCain-Palin team started to gain traction with the Republican base, aided by Web 2.0 tools. For example, several “rumors” that persisted about candidate Obama were stoked by e-mail-campaigns generated by his opponents. One particularly illustrative instance of these viral email campaigns was a video capturing negative outbursts at rallies, which was uploaded to YouTube and spread quickly across the web. The strategy backfired, and perhaps more infectious were the spoofs of these events and of opponents’ numerous press conferences and interviews gaffes that were captured on comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and then spread through YouTube and other social media. While these were of course not sanctioned by the Obama ‘08 campaign, they nonetheless had an important impact on blunting criticism of the candidate.

### Beyond the Campaign: The Networked Nation

Our final research question asks whether the Obama campaign helped to facilitate an ongoing social movement that will influence his administration and governance. Our conceptual framework suggests that when several key elements converge, there is both the motivation to participate in a new social movement as well as the organizational capacity to harness that motivation. On the one hand, these key elements include capitalizing on a sense of “identity,” whether that is generated by gender, race/ethnicity,

culture, or social class. Through politics, ideology and culture transform into social action. This transformation is aided by lifestyle choices that encourage activists to live the “private” life more in public, which has become a near mantra of Web 2.0 technologies. On the other hand, the organizational capacity and the ability to harness the resources that are mobilized by the increased energy and attention generated toward social action must be present. From this perspective, our findings suggest that a new social movement was formed out of the Obama ‘08 campaign. This finding is supported by a recent book by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (2010). In describing a dilemma faced by the struggling primary campaign of Senator Hillary Clinton, they report, “she worried that Obama seemed to be building some kind of movement in the cornfields. ‘Movement’ was the word [Hillary] kept hearing from Maggie Williams, who told her it was easy to run against a man, but devilishly hard to run against a cause.” (2010, p. 152) However motivated the movement generated by the Obama ‘08 campaign was, the question remained as to whether it would meet a second test of sustainability. Thus far, the movement’s role in the Sotomayor Supreme Court nomination and the historic health care reform would suggest yes.

The paper finds that the Obama campaign was able to use Web 2.0 and social media tools together into a coherent nationwide virtual organization, which motivated 3.1 million individual contributors to contribute significant amounts of money and to mobilize a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers. Clearly, the Obama campaign utilized these tools to go beyond educating the public and raising money to mobilizing the ground game, enhancing political participation, and getting out the vote. The extensive use of these tools also raises significant national security and privacy considerations.

The Obama network was capable of establishing and reproducing relationships that were usable whether by fundraising or volunteering. This network allowed the campaign to interact with people in a different way (Greengard 2009). Also, these tools suggest two possible long-term developments. Following Putnam (1995) we could see “networks of civic engagement [that] embody past success at collaboration which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration,” or we could see the fading away and withdrawal of resources and engagement.

Finally, the Obama-Biden transition team utilized many of the strategies used in the campaign and developed even more to facilitate the transition team and continue their attempt to transform political participation and civic engagement to influence their own administration and Democratic Congress. Since the inauguration, this network has been mobilized on a number of occasions to support the public policy agenda of the new administration (e.g., stimulus package, Sotomayor nomination, health care reform).

Obama's enormous online constituency of 13 million constitutes a major political asset (Borins 2009). Borins (2009) predicted that "the most significant use of the political constituency, however, could be for pushing legislation through Congress," and in fact it has been so, with the nomination of Judge Sotomayor and health care legislation.

Thus far, there is substantial evidence that the networked nominee is transforming government to lead the networked nation we predict. For example, after the election but before the inauguration, the Obama-Biden transition team adopted nearly all of the Obama '08 strategies to aid in the planning and execution of the transition into the White House. The same type of targeted e-mail used in the campaign, which integrates Web 2.0 tools such as video and social media, was used to start a dialog about the health care system and to motivate activists to support the plan and process for the massive health care legislation that subsequently made history with its passage. We would argue that this landmark legislative reform was in no small part due to the continued use of these Web 2.0 tools in the President Obama's "networked nation."

For the transition, they changed the approach to include not only Obama supporters but the whole nation, according to a report by Vogel (2008). "In the campaign," he said, "we had a relationship between Barack Obama and a whole lot of people who supported him and his policies and his ideas and his vision for the country. When he becomes president, he needs to be president of all the people." The Obama representatives expressed that for government the focus would be "more on transparency and accessibility and service and these kinds of things, rather than implementing a legislative agenda and sort of having a political organization" (Rospars in Dinan 2008)... though the tools would be the same.

A transition Web site was also operated in parallel with Change.gov: Transition.gov, the official Web site of the Office of the President-Elect. Change.gov and Transition.gov integrated all of the Web 2.0 strategies from the Obama '08 campaign: user-generated content, blogs, social media, events, video, and much more.

Transition.gov and Change.gov were the first ever Web sites created for a presidential transition period. These Web sites were similar to the campaign's; they had the same look and feel as well as the same functions and Web 2.0 characteristics.

In the U.S. system of government, an old adage is that there can only be one president at a time. This truism has evolved because at exactly noon on Inauguration Day, the U.S. Constitution dictates that power will be transferred from the sitting, incumbent president to the president-elect, who at that instant becomes the president (regardless of where the official ceremony is or whether they have been sworn in yet). In the case of the networked nominee, at exactly 12:01 p.m. on Tuesday, January 20, 2009, the official Web site of the White House (WhiteHouse.gov) switched from the control

of President George W. Bush to that of the new President Barack Hussein Obama. Consistent with the campaign and transition Web sites, the new WhiteHouse.gov includes tight Web 2.0 integration and is now built on the popular and powerful open source content management system Drupal.

A major issue that emerged immediately for the networked nominee, now turned networked national leader, was, "Could he still Tweet?" More specifically, could he still use his BlackBerry or any mobile communications device? This was a highly publicized question. His insistence signaled President Obama's desire to remain connected to his constituency in a way that he had grown accustomed to and comfortable with. As Borins (2009) argues, the question of the "president's BlackBerry was a potent cultural and generational marker, an important symbol of Obama's 'connectedness' in a double sense: both the deeply felt imperative to be in touch (with events and people) that was the hallmark of his campaign and his strong identification with technology, innovation, and the future" (2009, p. 755). The second signal raised by the BlackBerry question was one of security and the use of information technology in the new government. This issue was ultimately resolved, as far as the public knows, by the acquisition of a "super-secret" mobile communication device, reported to cost more than \$3,000. President Obama did not have to renounce to the use of a BlackBerry; however, the device is very restricted and the amount of people who have his e-mail address is very limited as well (Baker et al., 2009).

Another early innovation of the Obama Administration was the transformation of the presidential Saturday morning radio address to a weekly YouTube video. Finally, this diffusion of Web 2.0 and social media tools into government did not stop at the White House. It has quickly spread to numerous other agencies. Perhaps most visibly are the substantial efforts made by President Obama's chief Democratic rival in the 2008 elections, Senator Hillary Clinton, now the U.S. secretary of state. The State Department has engaged in a tremendous push toward "eDiplomacy" and what is being called "public diplomacy." For example, there is a "Secretary's Blog," where accounts of Clinton's views and visits with foreign leaders are captured. Other social media tools are prominently portrayed, including Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter.

Vogel (2008) also reported that a question about what should happen to the Obama '08 social network "prompted 500,000 responses . . . and helped gin up thousands of house parties across the country." There, Obama supporters deliberated on how to maintain the campaign's grassroots energy after the inauguration. There were some concerns about whether it was ethical to use the social network built up from the campaign after President Obama had been inaugurated. It seems that they have handled this potential issue by having people register again on the new sites.

Additional examples of the continued and deepening use of Web 2.0 tools in the new administration include the new Data.gov, a site that

highlights the vast amount of publically available data that is generated by the government. This site is coupled with a site focused on transparency, called *Recovery.gov*. This site documents recovery fund spending and makes data available for citizens. These sites are all oriented toward the Web 2.0 and social media values of user-generated content and multimedia communication and collaboration tools. Several of the sites permit comments, which allow for discussion. Also the Office of Public Liaison promotes public dialog around many of the issues facing the White House.

Thus, we can clearly see how the Obama '08 approach has been translated into the government. For instance:

- From volunteering to public service
- From campaign blog to presidential weekly address
- From campaign promises to pushing legislation
- From campaign issues forum to citizen dialog
- Access to public opinion on national issues
- Appointment of Macon Phillips, the first director of new media, as well as the first CIO

Shea and Burton (2006) argue that election season produces new types of grassroots campaigns that prevail on Election Day. Now, we think that the Obama '08 campaign media strategy may it make possible for the grassroots to prevail not only on Election Day but perhaps throughout the presidency.

Finally, one of the most recent examples of the networked nation is the new, and official, White House iPhone application, which includes some features that were undoubtedly learned during the Obama '08 campaign. The free application is easy to use, with a clean design and user interface. It incorporates blog posts, streaming video, photos, news/press briefings, and live video streamed events from the White House and presidential events.

## DISCUSSION

What does all this mean? The 2008 elections were a watershed moment in the use of social media for campaigning and, as we have shown, are changing aspects of governance as well. In many ways, politics has reached a point of no return. The ability to connect directly to people can enhance participation in political processes. Obama has moved information technology into the mainstream of American politics (Greengard 2009). Web 2.0 and social media proved to be a cost-effective way to build social capital, as it decreases the investment needed to build a network.

However, it is clear that the primary campaign and the election were not “decided” by Web 2.0 and social media. The same apparatus in the hands of another candidate and another organization may not have yielded the same results. However, Web 2.0 and social media did play a role in three critical areas.

First, Web 2.0 and social media facilitated the ability for the Obama campaign staff to operate as an effective virtual organization. In some ways, they took a virtual approach to the face-to-face “war room” of the Bill Clinton presidential campaigns. These tools also played a unique role in helping the campaign to identify and mobilize grassroots participation and activity, especially among young people. These tools also helped the Obama ‘08 campaign to mobilize the get-out-the-vote effort and to maximize early voting. Finally, it was quite clear that these tools allowed the Obama ‘08 campaign to raise enormous amounts of money (Vargas 2008), which had become critical to electoral success within the U.S. political system. Not only was the campaign able to raise money effectively, but they were able to raise it at critical points in the primary battle with Senator Clinton and in the general election against Senator McCain.

Another key success factor for the Obama ‘08 campaign in the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools is that they introduced them early and used them often in the campaign. Jennifer O’Malley Dillon, an Obama ‘08 campaign staffer who previously worked for Edwards, said, “I think we had the perfect balance of new technology, old school organization, faith in the people we hired, and trust they were going to get the job done” (Johnson and Balz 2009). Attracting key personnel to work on social media and recognizing that they are crucial to success and well-integrated into the campaign was crucial.

It is also clear that the core of the Obama ‘08 campaign has taken these Web 2.0 and social media strategies into the administration and tried to use them to support policy issues as diverse as the economic stimulus package, the Sotomayor Supreme Court confirmation process, and the health care debates. While the first two of these helped to illustrate early successes of the strategy, the challenges with health care reform point to the continued limitations of the political system. Web 2.0 and social media tools are not a “silver bullet.” However, ultimately, we argue that these tools and the movement they supported were critical elements of the eventually successful passage of health care reform.

Our integrated conceptual framework has been useful in helping us to understand what happened in the 2008 election regarding the use of Web 2.0 and social media. The RMP component explains how the campaign mobilized people at so many levels using Web 2.0 and social media. From this perspective, the key success factors were as follows: (1) political opportunities (mobilization); (2) indigenous organizational strength (organization); and (3) cognitive liberation (awareness of power). The NSMT component also helps to identify where the motivation for social action emerged.

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