ACTING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE 2008 OBAMA CAMPAIGN'S STRATEGIC USE OF NEW MEDIA TO SHAPE NARRATIVES OF THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to analyze how campaigns, movements, new media outlets, and professional journalism organizations interact to produce political discourse in an information environment characterized by new actors and increasingly fragmented audiences.*

Design – *To do so, this chapter offers a rare inside look at contemporary strategic campaign communications from the perspective of staffers. Twenty-one open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted with former staffers, consultants, and vendors to the 2008 Obama campaign.*

Findings – *During the primaries the Obama campaign worked to create and cultivate ties with activists in the mediated "netroots" movement, what Todd Gitlin has referred to as the "movement wing of the Democratic Party." The campaign sought to influence the debate among*

the principals and participants in this movement, given that they play an increasingly central role in the Democratic Party networks that help shape the outcome of contested primaries. During the general election, when the campaign and its movement allies shared the goal of defeating the Republicans, sites in the netroots functioned as important conduits of strategic and often anonymous campaign communications to new specialized journalistic outlets and the professional, general interest press. It is argued that campaigns and movements have extended established and developed new communication tactics to pursue their goals in a networked information environment.

Implications – This chapter's contribution lies in showing how much of what scholars assume to be the communicative content of amateurs is often the result of coordination among organized, and often hybrid, political actors.

On March 5, 2007, a striking new video appeared on YouTube, the video-sharing site. With the title of "Vote Different," the video featured Hillary Clinton as the dystopic leader in Apple's famous 1984 Superbowl ad heralding the arrival of the Macintosh. In the video, the young female protagonist sports a tank top with an Obama 2008 logo and hurls her hammer at the screen, shattering the propaganda of big brother. Uploaded by an anonymous user named ParkRidge47, the ad was one of the most memorable videos of the 2008 campaign and the first to go "viral" during the cycle. Amid much blogger and professional press speculation as to the creator, Arianna Huffington issued a call to ferret out the author on *The Huffington Post*. Huffington's readers eventually traced it to Philip de Vellis, a new media strategist working for the political consulting firm Blue State Digital, which provided much of the technology for Obama's presidential campaign. In a post on *The Huffington Post* explaining why he created the video, de Vellis (2007) declared that "This ad was not the first citizen ad, and it will not be the last. The game has changed."

The "Vote Different" ad reveals the networks of campaigns, consultancies, movement organizations, and interest groups involved in strategic communications using networked media. While de Vellis acted entirely independently of his firm and the campaign, and resigned soon after being discovered, his work was far more than the "citizen ad" he claimed.

Like many others who got their start in politics through jobs specializing in new media after the 2004 elections (Kreiss, 2012), de Vellis had worked on strategy for a number of organizations in Democratic politics. Prior to his work at Blue State Digital for their campaign and advocacy organization clients, de Vellis served as the Internet Communications Director for the 2006 senate campaign of Sherrod Brown and the deputy Internet communications director for Wal-Mart Watch, the labor-backed watchdog organization dedicated to monitoring and challenging the firm in the courts, on the streets, and in public discourse (Givan, 2007).

This chapter offers an initial inquiry into how campaigns, movements, new media outlets, and professional journalism organizations interact to produce public discourse in what Chadwick (2011) calls a new "hybrid news system" where legacy mass communication institutions (radio, television, newspapers) interact with individuals and collectives gathering through new media forms such as blogs, Facebook, and YouTube. As Chadwick (2011) argues, with the lowered cost of producing and disseminating political communication, "the Internet is creating a more open and fluid political opportunity structure" (p. 3) to define and contest political narratives. To date, much work has focused on the expanded capacities of the public and resource-poor interest group and movement challengers (Bimber, 2003) to capitalize on these discursive opportunities and hold political elites accountable. Accordingly, much of the literature generally assumes that candidates and other elected officials are forced to become more reactive than proactive, undermining their traditional agenda-setting role. As Gurevitch, Coleman, and Blumler (2009) argue, "political actors are compelled to adopt elaborate cross-media strategies, which may amount to little more than keeping up with the incessant flow of relevant information and hoping to spot embarrassing media content before it damages them" (p. 173).

And yet, as the story of the "Vote Different" video suggests, what many take to be the loss of campaign control and rise of authentically civic expression (Jenkins, 2006) is often far more complicated than it first appears. This chapter analyzes the processes behind producing and circulating campaign communications, as seen from the perspective of staffers on the 2008 Obama campaign. While research suggests that the blogs and media outlets that together constitute the "netroots" movement play an increasingly significant role in Party politics (Masket, Heaney, Miller, & Strolovich, 2011) and the public sphere, little is known about how candidates have sought to influence these movement actors. The chapter shows how during the contested primaries the Obama campaign worked to

create and cultivate ties with and influence the debate among the principals and participants in this movement, given their increasingly central role in the Democratic Party networks that help shape the outcome of elections. During the general election, when the campaign and its movement allies shared the goal of defeating John McCain and Sarah Palin, sites in the netroots functioned as important conduits of strategic and often anonymous campaign communications to the professional, general interest press.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I look at the literature on the interaction of parties, campaigns, movements, and networked media. I then detail the methods for this study and discuss the results of in-depth interviews with staffers on the 2008 Obama campaign. To conclude, I discuss the implications of these findings for scholarly understandings of political discourse.

THE NETROOTS MOVEMENT AND PARTY POLITICS

Over the last decade, a growing body of literature has detailed the entangling of the activities, memberships, organizations, and repertoires of social movements, civil society activism, institutional party and electoral politics, and even commercial enterprise (Walker, 2009). For example, Sobieraj (2011) shows how civil society organizations and social movements seek to leverage elections and their high visibility events such as party conventions to gain public visibility. Other scholars have demonstrated how electoral politics offers movements opportunities to advance strategic and policy objectives (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010; Schwartz, 2010). Meanwhile, a deep literature has revealed the "fuzzy and permeable boundary between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics" (Goldstone, 2004, p. 2).

For example, scholars have shown how the memberships and repertoires of movements and institutional political organizations can lack clear distinctions. Movement activists and party members often have overlapping affiliations. As Mische (2008) demonstrates in the context of Brazilian youth activism, individuals are embedded in multiple organizational networks as members of parties, civil society organizations such as unions, and social movements. In a highly publicized series of studies, Heaney and Rojas (2007, 2011) show how the fortunes and strength of the antiwar movement rose and fell with the dynamics of partisan mobilization. Democrats protested against the Iraq War to contest Republican leadership, but left the

movement in droves once Obama was elected. Schwartz (2010) shows how movements play complicated roles with respect to party actors, given their deep valuing of autonomy. From the perspective of social movements, parties can serve as allies, enemies, and targets depending on the context. Social movement and party allies at times collaborate and coordinate their activities toward shared goals. At others, movements engage in the boundary work that protects their ideological purity, fashioning the party into a target of contentious politics.

A number of scholars have analyzed the blending of repertoires and memberships of movements, campaigns, and other political actors in the context of their uptake of networked media. Scholars have shown how social movements are increasingly using networked media to engage in contentious politics both online and offline (Bennett, 2004; Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl, 2005; Carty, 2002; Earl & Kimport, 2008; Garrett, 2006; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Through a typology, Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, and Reynoso (2010) demonstrate how movements have used the Internet for everything from producing public information and facilitating offline activism to creating entirely new modes of online organizing (see also Earl & Kimport, 2011). One movement organization that has pioneered a new "hybrid repertoire" (Chadwick, 2007) of contentious action is MoveOn.org, a new "internet-mediated issue generalist" organization (Karpf, 2012; see also Carty, 2011). From its earliest incarnation as a decentralized e-mail list in 1998 to urge Congress to "move on" from the Clinton impeachment proceedings, MoveOn has used networked media to develop a relatively flat leadership structure and decentralize the execution of national political actions that have engaged millions in mass, issue-based mobilizations online and offline, including street protests, candlelight vigils, and lobby days (Carty, 2011; Chadwick, 2007).

MoveOn is one central organization in what scholars have identified as a broader "netroots" movement. From its origins in the online efforts around Howard Dean's presidential candidacy, the term "netroots" has evolved to provide an overarching identity for a heterogeneous group of activists gathering online who see themselves involved in a common political enterprise to reshape the Democratic Party.[1] Sites where these individuals engage in social and symbolic action include blogs such as DailyKos, new journalistic outlets such as *Talking Points Memo*, progressive think tanks such as Think Progress, infrastructure organizations such as ACT Blue, and a new generation of partisan political consultancies specializing in new media that were launched after the 2004 elections (Kreiss, 2012). These movement actors loosely coordinate their actions through a variety

of backchannels, including an e-mail listserv called TownHouse (Karpf, 2012).

The netroots is an intra-party social movement. From its earliest beginnings as a movement, netroots activists have defined themselves mostly in opposition to the Democratic Party elites they believe are too willing to capitulate to Republicans, and they have only a loose orientation toward shared policy positions (Kerbel, 2009). As Farrell (2006) argues, "The netroots aren't complaining that the Democratic Party isn't radical enough; they're complaining that it's losing elections. Netroots bloggers don't share a common ideology. If they are united by anything, it is their harsh criticism of the Republican Party, their shared anger at the Democratic Party's failures, and their rough analysis of how it could do better." Despite demographically and culturally being members of the elite (Hindman, 2008), netroots activists argued that they were unable to influence Party leaders through institutional channels, given a web of entrenched consulting relationships and business practices that dictated the strategy and legislative approaches of its candidates and officials (Bai, 2007; Kerbel, 2009).[2]

To achieve its broad goal of forcing Democratic candidates to be more confrontational with Republicans and stand by the Party's platform, the netroots crafted a hybrid repertoire of contentious and institutionalized political action. As detailed above, MoveOn functions simultaneously as an interest group in the lobbying it coordinates through its political action committee and a social movement in its coordination of antiwar candlelight vigils (Chadwick, 2007). Other netroots organizations demonstrate similar hybridity. Markos Moulitsas, the founder of DailyKos, has used his blog as a platform both for progressive elected officials to discuss policy and to orchestrate boycotts of campaign technology provider Convio and the political consulting firm EchoDitto for their perceived willingness to work with Republicans, in the process helping drive the industry toward increased partisanship after the 2004 elections (Kreiss, 2012).

It is in the domain of electoral politics that the netroots has had the greatest impact on Party politics. DailyKos and a network of other blogs such as *MyDD* and *FireDogLake*, as well as progressive organizations such as the *Progressive Change Campaign Committee*, routinely engage in coordinated action to gather funds and volunteers for Democratic general election candidates in races where Party elites have withheld resources after deciding the race was unwinnable.[3] In 2006, for instance, netroots bloggers recruited and provided resources to Democratic candidates to contest districts that the Party and its prominent interest groups such as EMILY's List ignored (Kerbel, 2009). While many of these candidates lost, Farrell

(2006) argues that these activities have ''sometimes identified Republican weaknesses and helped build up party infrastructure in parts of the country that the Democrats had effectively abandoned for a generation. More to the point, they have forced the Democratic Party to begin thinking again as a national party with a national strategy.''

Netroots actors have also engaged in contentious electoral politics in fielding candidates to run against conservative Democrats in primaries, a strategy that has challenged Party elites. For the netroots, campaigns are political opportunities. Campaigns offer the netroots the chance to advance their goal of creating a more confrontational Democratic Party and gain credit and access if their favored candidate wins. The netroots has engaged in a number of these high profile actions since 2004. Netroots organizations and blogs engaged in a large, coordinated, and high profile effort to support Ned Lamont's bid to unseat Joe Lieberman in 2006, which succeeded in knocking the former vice presidential nominee off the Party's ballot line for the general election. In 2010, the netroots helped run a strong primary challenge to Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, bucking much of the Party's establishment. In that race, as well as others, netroots actors joined ''campaign assemblages'' (Nielsen, 2012) with other allied organizations, such as labor unions, to provide field resources to candidates.

These coordinated electoral actions reveal how netroots actors are a part of the networks that make up the Democratic Party. Over the last few years, a number of scholars have produced an important body of work reconceptualizing political parties as networks. Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller (2008) argue that parties are shifting coalitions of not only elites such as elected officials, but also interest groups, social movement organizations, political consultants, state party leaders, and administrative staffs (see also Koger, Masket, & Noel, 2010). These scholars argue that these networks matter a great deal in nominating contests. Intra-party networks contest power by mobilizing behind particular candidates in primaries (Cohen et al., 2008). During the last decade, the netroots has become increasingly influential in the Party (Galvin, 2008). In their empirical study of the composition of the networks that make up the two parties, Masket et al. (2011) show how MoveOn now occupies a central position in Party networks, and argue that the organization's ''rise is especially notable, as its Internet origins and informal organizational structure suggests the increasing centrality of the relatively young 'netroots' as constituency within the Democratic Party'' (p. 23). One reason for this success is the netroots' ideological flexibility and issue generalist orientation, which have helped these activists forge alliances with a diverse array of Party allies, such as

unions and interest groups, and secure resources from a broad base of contributors to Democratic causes and candidates.

Campaigns work to build coalitions of these party actors during primaries. And, much anecdotal evidence suggests that candidates increasingly view the netroots as an important Democratic Party actor with access to key financial and human resources. For example, a number of campaigns have hired prominent bloggers to serve as liaisons to the netroots and coordinate digital strategy. Jerome Armstrong of *MyDD* worked for Mark Warner's 2008 presidential campaign, netroots activist Matt Stoller worked on the campaign of John Edwards in 2008, and blogger Peter Daou worked on netroots outreach for Kerry's general election campaign and was a senior online advisor for Clinton's campaign. Prominent bloggers participate in conference calls around strategy and policy with candidates and elected officials, and both have taken to guest posting (or sending surrogates to do so) on blogs such as DailyKos. Demonstrating its power and visibility, the ''Netroots Nation'' conference (formerly known as ''YearlyKos,'' given its origin in the offline meeting of participants of DailyKos) hosted all the major Democratic Party candidates for a debate in the summer of 2007. Democratic advocacy and interest groups such as Planned Parenthood now engage in blogger outreach as part of their communications strategy, routinely sending out releases, hosting strategy calls, and planning events for netroots actors.

Meanwhile, a number of scholars suggest that the netroots is influential in shaping political discourse outside of the Party among the general interest press. A distinguished body of research has looked into the interaction of movements and legacy media institutions. Gitlin (1980) showed how the framing of the Students for a Democratic Society in media coverage and the norms of ''newsworthiness'' among professional journalists shaped under-standings of the organization among the public, other political actors, and even the activists themselves. Other work has shown how movements can be proactive in strategically attempting to gain professional press coverage (Andrews & Caren, 2010), even though their efforts to learn the routines of news gathering are often counterproductive, given journalists' desire for ''authentic'' emotional and spontaneous protest (Sobieraj, 2011). Scholars have also looked into how social movement organizations leverage professional journalistic attention to gain material and symbolic resources (Andrews & Biggs, 2006; Rohlinger, 2006) and legitimate causes and issues (Ferree, 2003; Rohlinger, 2002).

Given that the netroots is mediated by its very nature, the movement engages in symbolic action to shape perceptions of its identity and political issues for its members and the wider public. A number of scholars have

suggested that the netroots is rooted in the tradition of radical and activist media (Lievrouw, 2011) and in many ways resembles, on a greater scale, the leftist 1960's press that was fueled by the New Left (McMillian, 2011). Carty (2010) has suggested that the netroots expands the public sphere and provides new opportunities for communicative action, providing a "radical flank effect" (Haines, 1984) for Democratic Party positions. A decade of scholarship has looked closely at the microprocesses of content diffusion between blogs and the professional press. Drezner and Farrell (2008) documented how "when key weblogs focus on a new or neglected issue – blogs can socially construct an agenda or interpretive frame that acts as a focal point for mainstream media, shaping and constraining the larger political debate." A number of other scholars have fleshed out processes of intermedia agenda setting between political blogs and established journalistic institutions (Davis, 2009; McKenna & Pole, 2008; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Tremayne, 2007).

Finally, a number of recent studies have looked closely at the production of episodes of contentious symbolic politics. Anderson (2010) shows how activists "working the press" and journalists and bloggers seeking traffic together produced and contested the "news facts" of an eviction in Philadelphia. Chadwick (2011) details how journalists, activists, and political elites interacted to produce an ever-shifting narrative of England's "bullygate" affair. In a study directly relevant for this chapter, Karpf (2010) reveals the ways that the circulation of the George Allen "Macaca" video and its eventual uptake by professional journalists was a product of coordinated, communicative action by the Jim Webb campaign and netroots actors. In the process, Karpf shows that while technological platforms such as YouTube provide new opportunities for campaigns and citizens to produce and disseminate content, organizations have to work to ensure it gains audiences and attention. For the netroots, promoting the Macaca video served the ends of partisan mobilization and the opposition framing of a Republican Senate candidate.

METHODS

This chapter grows out of a larger project (Kreiss, 2012) that chronicles the history of new media and Democratic political campaigning over the last decade. For this project, I conducted open-ended interviews with more than 60 political staffers and consultants active across three presidential election cycles. As this is a historical work, participants were personally identified.

Participants could, however, declare any statement in their interviews "not for attribution" (i.e., directly quoted but anonymous), "on background" (i.e., not directly quoted), or "off the record" (i.e., not to be reported) at their discretion. The Institutional Review Board of Stanford University, where I began this research, granted this proposal expedited review and approved the study along with a consent form that clearly stated the terms of participation.[4]

For the larger project, I interviewed a number of individuals who worked in new media, communications, field, and management on the 2008 Obama campaign. I purposively selected interviewees on the basis of their positions in the campaign organization as revealed by Federal Election Commission filings. I also asked participants for recommendations as to whom else to contact. Through these activities I netted a sample size of 21, including 15 former staffers and 6 vendors to the campaign. Senior staff participants included the campaign's Chief Technology Officer and Director of the New Media Division. Within the New Media Division, I interviewed the heads of a number of departments including the Director of Internet Organizing, Director of Internet Advertising, Director of Analytics, Design Director, Blog Director, and Director of New Media-Battleground States. I also interviewed a number of lower-level staffers working within these departments, as well as New Media Division staffers who served as liaisons to the Communications, Field, Finance, and Technology Divisions of the campaign. With few exceptions, most of these staffers joined the campaign during the primaries and stayed on through the general election. In addition to these staffers, I interviewed a number of individuals working for firms that provided a range of technology, data, and consulting services to the campaign, including Blue State Digital and Voter Activation Network. Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and lasted between one and four hours, with the average interview being just over two hours. I conducted these interviews in person, on the telephone, and through Internet services such as Skype. I recorded and transcribed all of these interviews. Given that the interview data is presented here reported from sources who wished to remain anonymous, scholars may question the motives of my subjects and veracity of their comments. In my determination, participants did not have any financial or other interests at stake in the information presented here. There was also marked consistency in the information provided by staffers at all levels of the campaign and outside vendors. Many participants explicitly stated that their motivation was to tell the true story of their work on the campaign, but also expressed concern that a full account, with the "off the record" information, would damage the reelection effort and their careers.[5]

The data is ultimately and inevitably limited by the anonymity of the sources and the "on background" nature of much of the information presented here. In the end, given that much social science routinely protects the identity of human subjects, I do not think the nature of the data undermines the larger analytical claims advanced in this chapter. Meanwhile, while I could not do it in all cases, I tried whenever possible in consultation with my sources to provide direct quotations where it would be possible to preserve their anonymity.

FINDINGS: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS WORK

A number of works document the Obama campaign's uptake of an extraordinary array of networked tools and social media platforms such as Facebook to provide citizens with opportunities to get involved in the campaign (Burch, 2009; Cogburn, Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Harris, Moffitt, & Squires, 2010; Levenshus, 2010; Sabato, 2010). Others emphasize how these technologies provided the campaign with new ways to target particular groups of voters, and even individuals, through messages delivered through e-mail and online advertising (Carty, 2010; Kreiss & Howard, 2010).

The campaign's strategic new media work to shape discourse in the netroots movement, frame opposing candidates, and influence the reporting of professional journalists is less visible, however. As detailed below, during the primaries Obama's staffers focused on what I refer to as "network building," the creation, cultivation, and maintenance of ties with movement allies that the campaign mobilized for informational purposes. During the general election, much of staffers' work focused on "seeding" new media outlets, strategically providing content to their network of allies and new online journalistic sites in the attempt to influence the general interest press and gain access to the wider electorate.

The Primaries

Obama's staffers believed that the netroots represented an important segment of the Party's base of primary voters and donors. Staffers suggested that blogs were the online equivalent of the "cable chatter" that the campaign also sought to influence, given that active Democrats routinely watched cable news personalities such as Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann. Staffers also knew that Obama was not the favored candidate

in the netroots during much of 2007. While many of Obama's policy proposals were similar to his rivals, his posturing as a pragmatic and "above the fray" candidate ran counter to the confrontational style of many in the netroots. As one staffer described, "During the primary there really was a choice between John Edwards, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton. They were all very progressive people, so it was incredibly important to try [to persuade bloggers] given that Obama did not have the support of the netroots." The new John Edwards, who dropped the sunny optimism of his presidential run in 2004 in favor of more populist rhetoric, had the support of many bloggers and their publics. Clinton and Obama had their own backers, and vied for those not yet committed. For example, Jerome Armstrong, the blogger at *MyDD* who coined the term "netroots," supported Clinton and his blog became a central hub for online backers of her candidacy.

To persuade individuals and recruit new supporters among members of the netroots, the campaign's goal was, as one staffer described, "all about driving the narrative." This communications work was not about "destroying" opponents, but what one staffer suggested was attempting to "move the needle incrementally" in terms of perceptions of the campaign, the strength of Obama as a candidate, and shortcomings of his rivals. Staffers stated that they sought to conduct much of this communications work anonymously. On one level, this enabled staffers to capitalize on the reputations of their allies in the netroots. In other words, if a netroots blogger seemingly independently argued the merits of Obama it would have more credibility than if the campaign did so. On another, communications designed to undermine rivals had to be performed anonymously, given the campaign's carefully constructed narrative of Obama as a post-partisan candidate who offered the tantalizing possibility of transformational "change" from polarized politics. The candidate, for instance, publicly forswear negative campaigning.[6] All of which meant that content that portrayed another candidate negatively had to be disseminated discretely, out of view of the press, lest there be charges of hypocrisy from journalists or other campaigns. Finally, there were Party norms around how aggressively candidates could criticize one another, given that they shared the campaign trail with individuals who could become the eventual nominee.

With these communications goals, Obama's staffers sought to create and cultivate ties with prominent bloggers and other voices in the netroots. The relationship between the Obama campaign and the netroots was symbiotic and each often found the relationship mutually beneficial. For the campaign, the netroots provided a means of speaking to an active part of

the Party's base during the highly contested primaries. Meanwhile, staffers also knew that elite bloggers were an independent group of actors in Party politics with their own political goals, information needs, and status concerns. Staffers routinely cited that bloggers wanted to be taken seriously as an important interest group in Democratic politics and have influence on strategy and policy. At the same time, staffers also knew that bloggers faced enormous pressure to continually have new information and be constantly generating content.

Given these dynamics, staffers developed a host of tactics for influencing the discourse in the netroots. One of the primary ways the campaign curried favor with bloggers was through offering informational exclusives, much like candidates do with favored reporters. According to staffers, exclusives helped bloggers promote their sites and elevated (or cemented) their status in the internally competitive netroots. For example, staffers cited how they often released new videos intended for Obama's YouTube channel to the influential *Crooks and Liars* first because the blog's authors sought video exclusives and the campaign wanted to cultivate that relationship. Campaign staffers also provided prominent progressive bloggers with information and research when they asked for it. The campaign developed relationships through these means with blogs such as *America Blog*, *FireDogLake*, and partisan journalists such as Sam Stein at *The Huffington Post*.[7] Meanwhile, as one staffer described, the campaign had liaisons to the netroots tasked with "helping to try to calm them down when they were mad, to give them research when they asked for it, to try to build relationships with them … ." Staffers, for instance, tried to proactively ensure that the candidate spoke to the concerns of the netroots. To this end, staffers read a number of the candidate's speeches in advance, and at times worked with the speechwriters to add in content that bloggers would be responsive to and excited about – and take out or moderate what would upset them.

At other times, staffers contacted prominent bloggers to justify decisions made by the campaign if they ran counter to long-held positions of the netroots. For example, staffers had to prepare Moulitsas of DailyKos and other netroots bloggers after the candidate accepted an invitation to appear on FOX News. The netroots had long argued that Democrats' appearances on the partisan news outlet legitimize it as a fair journalistic venue. To assuage their frustration with Obama's decision, staffers contacted Moulitsas to solicit a list of things that he thought Bill O'Reilly was going to ask during the interview, particularly with regard to the candidate's relationship with bloggers. Staffers subsequently passed this along to Obama's prep team.

Staffers also sought to influence elite members of the netroots by engaging in the backchannels that help movement actors coordinate their political discourse and activities. For example, staffers participated in and worked through cultivated allies on ''Townhouse'' and other important listservs for netroots bloggers, Party consultants, and online activists.[8] These listservs provide venues for this community to network, share and generate ideas, find out about professional opportunities, and plan strategy. Through their own comments and those of their proxies on these lists, Obama's staffers actively participated in debates about the candidates for the Democratic nomination. If a blogger attacked Obama, for instance, staffers secretly provided allies with a response or information rebutting the claims. As one staffer described, ''It is important to win the internal arguments because there were a lot of people just hammering Obama on their blogs.'' Staffers argued that this communications work was important, given that these conversations often shaped the content of a host of different progressive blogs and other netroots sites.

Many of these tactics can be seen in the campaign's careful cultivation of the DailyKos community throughout the primaries. Given the extensive use of data within the campaign (Kreiss, 2012), staffers knew that DailyKos was by far the largest blog driver of traffic to the campaign's website. As a staffer described, ''The thing that we really cared most about, the thing that we really focused most on was DailyKos. We would track the metrics on our videos, DailyKos drove so much traffic – and so did *The Huffington Post* – but DailyKos just drove an insane amount of traffic. They just got so much more traffic than other blogs.'' Staffers also viewed DailyKos as the leading information distribution hub for the entire netroots that set much of the political agenda for the entire movement. Given DailyKos's outsized importance, the campaign sought to maintain good ties with Moulitsas. For example, the campaign provided Moulitsas with one of the larger exclusives of the campaign: Obama's birth certificate. DailyKos published a scan of the document on June 12, 2008, a week after Clinton conceded. The fact that the campaign provided Moulitsas with this information over more established, professional journalists reveals how highly the campaign valued this particular outlet.

As important as the tie with the founder of DailyKos, Obama staffers knew that the technical design of this group blog and the social practices it supports created other avenues for promoting the campaign's messaging.[9] DailyKos has a number of independent contributing editors and featured writers, selected by Moulitsas or nominated by the community itself.[10] At times, the campaign contacted these writers directly to disseminate content.

However, staffers most often worked through the diary and commenting systems of the site. Within the netroots, DailyKos was the first to adopt Scoop, a "collaborative media application" that enables members of a community to start their own blogs (called "diaries" on the DailyKos website).[11] This functionality of the DailyKos platform, along with attendant social practices for utilizing it, resulted in a sprawling community of thousands of diarists. The Scoop platform also features an extensive reputation system for diaries and comments. Registered users can "recommend" diaries. If they receive enough votes, diaries make it onto the front page in the "recommended diaries" sidebar, securing them millions of page views. Users can also rate comments positively or negatively, with positive votes building the reputation of the commenter. All these "votes" for content, meanwhile, are weighted based on whether the user has a good reputation on the site.

Staffers took advantage of this social and technical infrastructure, building relationships with supporters that were regular diarists or commenters on the site to promote the campaign's content. For instance, a group of DailyKos members who organized an open group on My.BarackObama.com (the campaign's online electoral platform) called "Kossacks for Obama" invited staffers to take part. Individuals participating in Kossacks for Obama worked to promote each others' diaries and voted positively for each others' comments, helping increase their visibility in the wider DailyKos community. Sometimes campaign staffers wrote their own diaries under their names, and relied on Obama's Kossack supporters to promote them. At other times, campaign staffers developed content and ideas and passed them along to popular diarists in the hope that they might like and circulate this information with the legitimacy of an independent community writer.[12] This content ranged from suggested talking points to arguments about opponents. In all of this work, the campaign continually reached out to its supporters, especially those with good reputations on the site and whose votes for recommending content were weighted. These coordinated efforts were especially important during the primaries, when supporters of all three major Democratic candidates vied to promote their groups' diaries, and thus their candidates. As one staffer described, the fact that Obama's staffers were successful at promoting their content:

> ... was not random. There was a coordinated effort to boost things on the diaries and then there was a super secret list ... [of] hyper, hyper influential DailyKos diarists. And, the more influential you are the more your votes count in the DailyKos system. So it was this amazing thing. There were these diary wars between the Clinton camp and the Obama camp and we just smoked them because we were just so much more coordinated.

> You know the Clinton folks could have really had a prominent place in the DailyKos community but I don't think they were nearly as coordinated as the Obama supporters were.

The campaign also took advantage of the informational opportunities DailyKos afforded. For example, in the run up to the Iowa caucuses, the Clinton campaign had to apologize when a volunteer state county chair passed along an e-mail stating that Obama was a Muslim who attended a madrassa as a child. The Obama campaign discovered this forwarded e-mail through a sympathizer who found it in a comment on DailyKos. A staffer subsequently passed it along anonymously to Christopher Hayes, a blogger for The Nation, where it made headlines and attracted more widespread attention, ultimately driving a news cycle. Clinton apologized, which came at an opportune time for the Obama campaign, given that the candidate was facing his own questions over "voter bullying" phone calls in Iowa.

Another important tactic in staffers' repertoire of digital communication practices was disseminating videos through YouTube, the video-sharing site, and then relying on a network of blogger allies to promote them. YouTube enabled staffers to post completely anonymous and untraceable videos, provided they were careful. As one staffer described the campaign's use of the video platform:

> … you just have to understand that anyone who is a smart campaigner utilizes literally any tool they can to win. During the second half [of the primaries] we would create anonymous YouTube videos … . This is the part of the landscape of online campaigning where there is infinite possibility for the dark arts, frankly. Because you can create a YouTube video and just upload it anonymously and it could be a devastating video that is completely untraceable back to the campaign.

Just as staffers knew there were benefits to anonymity in using netroots bloggers to disseminate content, particularly for obscuring the source of campaign communications, staffers also wanted videos to appear to go "viral" (Wallsten, 2010) on their own so they looked like the work of Obama's grassroots supporters. A video going viral on its own seldom happened in practice, however. As one staffer described, content often needs to be promoted to be widely disseminated:

> Occasionally some great piece of content will just go viral. But I think what's even more interesting is that the internet shows that when a coordinated group of people get together they can build immense power. This coordinated group of people can make things go insanely viral.

To promote its videos, staffers worked through its network of supporters in the netroots, from influential bloggers with highly visible platforms such

as DailyKos to reporters at new media journalistic outlets such as *The Huffington Post*. For example, during the primaries, staffers created short YouTube videos intended to amplify the gaffes and perceived "flip-flops" by Clinton and her supporters. When Clinton's senior advisor Mark Penn made a gaffe, for instance, staffers mashed this up with other gaffes in short web videos that became "highlight reels" of sorts. Staffers then uploaded these videos to YouTube anonymously and reached out to their blogger allies to promote them. The goal was to make videos circulate throughout the blogosphere and ultimately, especially during the general election, make their way to the professional press with its audiences that reached beyond the netroots.

The General Election

Once the active primary season ended, the campaign's allies in the netroots turned toward the challenge of defeating John McCain and Sarah Palin. The campaign's communications goals shifted accordingly, from shaping the narrative of the race among Democratic primary voters to bringing down the opponent and influencing the general interest press.

A number of significant changes in the Obama campaign organization occurred during the general election to assist in meeting these goals. There was a much more professionalized and tighter communications operation staffed by a bevy of newly hired experts, including new regional and Black, Latino, and Asian communications directors. The campaign also created a rapid response team responsible for vetting all external communications.[13] The campaign tasked this team, made up of staffers from the Communications, Research, and New Media Divisions, with responding to attacks from Republicans and crafting their own to shape press coverage. The rapid response team also reviewed much of the campaign's communications with the press, bloggers and other new media outlets, and supporters.

A number of staffers described how the tone of the campaign changed significantly from the primaries to the general election. As one staffer described the work of the rapid response team: "every day it was like I would wake up very early, get to the office for the early morning meeting and just like 'boom'! The horse race starts – and it is more like a gladiator fight." This fight took place primarily on symbolic grounds as the campaigns strove to define the stakes of the election. For the Obama campaign, this cultural work encompassed both the candidate's mobilizing rhetoric and staffers' less public attempts to influence coverage of the election by the professional press.

With the netroots behind the Party's standard-bearer and a much wider electorate, the campaign's primary objective was to leverage sites in the netroots and new media journalistic outlets such as Politico to shape the election narratives of the general interest press. Legacy news outlets such as NBC and the Associated Press (AP) have vastly broader audiences than political blogs and specialized D.C. media in terms of geography, demographics, and political knowledge and interest. During the general election, the campaign needed to reach beyond the committed partisans gathering on sites such as DailyKos and the inside-the-beltway audiences of new media journalistic sites such as Politico. The Obama campaign also coveted the legitimacy that professional journalism offered. Staffers believed that even with the erosion of trust in the media, professional journalists still occupied a unique role in the eyes of the public as the third party arbiters of the election, particularly for those less ideologically committed.

While their audiences were not ends in themselves, netroots blogs and specialized online journalism sites were valuable conduits for circulating content to the professional press. For example, if staffers judged a piece of information to not be intrinsically newsworthy, such as a minor bit of opposition research, staffers sent it to the networks they had cultivated during the primaries in the hopes that conversations online would capture the attention of new media or cable journalistic outlets with specialized audiences, such as aggregator Matt Drudge of *The Drudge Report*, Ben Smith from Politico, or Olbermann from MSNBC, all of whom regularly monitored the leading blogs. For example, during the general election staffers occasionally created content that critiqued or lampooned the Republican candidates. They posted this content on a DailyKos diary and asked the Kossacks for Obama to promote it. From there, staffers brought it to the attention of a cultivated group of "Diggers for Obama" active on *Digg*, the social news site that enables people to "Digg" (promote) or "bury" stories based on their preferences. These "Diggers for Obama" stood at the ready to promote the campaign's content when staffers requested it in the hopes that this content would become one of Digg's most promoted articles, ensuring tens of thousands of additional page views.[14] Staffers knew that even if the new media aggregators at the *The Drudge Report* or journalists at Politico did not see this content as significant, they would often write stories about what was being discussed online. As one staffer described:

> Basically if there was something very significant usually we would go to the Ben Smith [of Politico] types. If there was something else, something that maybe we found or something seemingly on the margins, or some random thing that seemed stupid … we would just clip it and get it working on the blogs, get the blogs juiced up about it enough

that then Ben Smith would be like, "the blogs are angry about what so and so said," and then maybe Keith Olbermann would talk about it that night.

As this staffer suggests, the campaign also directly sent content to new media outlets such as *The Drudge Report* and Politico. A number of staffers stated that the campaign, for instance, had a direct line to Matt Drudge, despite his support of conservative candidates and causes. The campaign also worked through its contacts to get articles placed on sites such as Politico, providing these new media outlets with exclusives in the hopes of cultivating relationships, precluding future negative stories, and generating damaging press coverage about the opponent. With short news cycles and the need for steady streams of timely information to fill endless news holes in a highly competitive new media environment, staffers stated that these outlets were particularly receptive to the information they provided.

The hope was that once these specialized new media sites picked up a story it would attract the attention of the general interest professional press. With political reporters throughout the country among their most important readerships, sites such as *The Drudge Report* and Politico were often important conduits to the larger national news ecosystem. As one staffer described: "Things can move so fast, I mean some of them [stories] can get on *Drudge* and drive a [national] narrative for a week."

There were tiers of professional press outlets, with audience size and demographics paramount to the campaign. Staffers, for instance, sought favorable coverage and story placement in the AP, which they saw as the ultimate arbiter of influence during the general election because people were exposed to its articles far more often than other outlets such as *The New York Times*. The AP not only had a larger audience, the campaign's staffers valued that its articles reached beyond urban, coastal demographics in appearing in small market papers across the country. Staffers also argued that the AP frequently set the agenda for local television and radio news. Beyond the AP, the national six o'clock news was very important to the campaign because staffers argued that is when less committed, more independent, less knowledgeable, and centrist voters tuned into the presidential race. As one staffer described the campaign's communications strategy:

> The ultimate gold standard was basically seeding something on the blogs, then maybe it would go to one of these more mainstream blogs like Politico, then it might hit the AP, then the cable chatter, and then it would hit Brian Williams … . The gold standard was always the 6 o'clock news. The main news … . During the campaign the whole communications team would huddle around the TV. If there was a negative story about

the other side or if there was a positive story about our side people would end up cheering and giving high fives. It was really like scoring a touch down.

Even as professional journalism outlets took on outsized importance during the general election, in a feedback loop staffers used this coverage as fodder to keep the campaign's supporters engaged in the campaign. A number of staffers described how they watched television news "like hawks," clipped anything out of the ordinary, and sent it to progressive blogs or talked about it with staffers of progressive sites such as *Media Matters*, a media monitoring site run by the think tank Think Progress. For example, staffers may have inadvertently raised Michelle Bachman's national profile when they publicized her comment on MSNBC's Hardball in October 2008 that Obama and Congress should be investigated for un-American activities:

> We saw that and we thought "that is fucking crazy" and we just sent that out and worked people up about it. These are the little things that might go unnoticed but when a campaign is watching you incredibly vigilantly for anything, and then making a marked effort to push that stuff out, that is how it catches on. Frankly that is why Media Matters is so valuable: because you know they are able to capture every single little thing because they got people watching all day and they've got a network of bloggers who are going to promote this stuff … .

DISCUSSION

Research into the uptake of the Internet by political candidates is now well into its second decade (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Davis, 1999; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006; Johnson, 2011, Medvic, 2011; Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006). Few accounts within this literature, however, look at the dynamics between institutional party politics and movements. This is especially important, given that digital technologies not only have enabled new actors to participate symbolically in elections (Davis, 2009; Stromer-Galley & Bryant, 2011), but also have provided a wealth of new opportunities for movements to strategically engage in electoral politics (Kerbel, 2009).

This study offers the first detailed look at how campaigns interact with mediated movements such as the netroots in pursuit of their informational goals. While more research is needed to determine whether the 2008 Obama campaign is unique, other studies suggest that its organization and tactics are found at other sites. For example, the finding that staffers built informational networks and had fluid communication work practices, even as they were embedded in a data-driven and formally managed hierarchical organization,   accords   with   what   Chadwick   (2007)   describes   as

"organizational hybridity" in networked information environments. Chadwick shows how campaigns and interest groups are increasingly adopting the networked organizational forms of social movements, and argues that campaigns and parties will "develop subunits that exhibit social movement style digital network repertoires but such subunits are sealed off from the main campaign decision makers, or are strategically channeled toward specific societal groups perceived as receptive to looser forms of political engagement" (p. 297).

As this chapter suggests, the Obama campaign blended old and new strategic communication tactics conducive to these new forms of political engagement. In its work with the netroots, the campaign adapted well-established tactics to influence professional journalists, such as strategically releasing information (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 1999), cultivating relationships with reporters (Startt, 2004), deploying anonymous sources (Carlson, 2011), and granting journalists exclusives (Westphal & Deephouse, 2011). At the same time, given the sociotechnical organization of sites in the netroots, the campaign adopted new tactics such as providing informational exclusives to prominent bloggers based on the networked structure of the movement and working within sites such as DailyKos to influence the activists gathering on blogs. These communication practices lend support to a number of recent inquiries into the networked organization and structure of the netroots as the source of its scale and capacity for social and symbolic action as a movement. For example, a number of scholars (Benkler & Shaw, 2010; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010) have argued that the netroots is both densely interlinked and has informational elites that serve as "organizational hubs" (Lev-On & Hardin, 2008) that concentrate resources and attention, facilitating collective action.

While these scholars have analyzed the structure and dynamics of networked collective action, more work is needed to uncover the goals of netroots actors for their engagement with institutional electoral politics and their power vis-à-vis campaigns and candidates. Staffers' accounts of their interactions with bloggers make clear that they were independent allies who were able, although to a limited extent, to make the campaign responsive to their concerns. The fact that staffers responsible for interfacing with the netroots sometimes modified the candidate's speeches with an eye toward appealing to the netroots and involved Moulitsas in Obama's FOX News prep are two examples. And yet, there were clear limits on the power of the netroots to hold the campaign accountable to its interests. According to staffers, bloggers were often appreciative of the informational exclusives and attention accorded to them by the campaign, but they were "angry a lot" at

their lack of a strong strategy and policy voice onto the campaign. Bloggers often felt that they were not accorded an inside channel to the campaign, even in relation to other important Party interest groups. For example, as one staffer describes:

> [One member of the netroots] was incredibly combative. He said to me 'look I don't understand … the campaign has a liaison to the unions who's probably some big shot fucking former union organizer. They have a liaison to the women's groups who is some old women's group pro. The netroots are a real constituency, they need to be treated like a constituency, not just treated like random bloggers in pajamas.

More research, especially from the perspective of movement actors, is needed to determine whether this statement reveals that the netroots' influence within Party networks may still be limited, given the comparatively greater amount of attention the campaign seemingly focused on other Democratic interest groups. Even more, research is needed on those times when movements such as the netroots have been able to influence the policy or strategy of campaigns and parties to discover the contexts or tactics that facilitate this power.

Future work can also look at the relationship of the netroots with the professional press. As is clear, during the general election the campaign placed legacy journalism at the center of its communications strategy. This suggests that staffers knew that the netroots was still reliant on the professional press in some ways. Research is needed on the nature of this dependence, so scholars can update accounts of the interaction of the professional press and movements to account for the informational affordances of networked media. For example, writing before the wide-spread uptake of networked communications media, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argue that movements need the professional press for mobilization, validation, and "scope enlargement." Low-cost networked communications technologies seemingly have changed these needs in some ways and not in others. Netroots activists are less dependent on legacy news outlets for mobilization, given their expanded ability to reach potential sympathizers. While through their informational affordances, blogs have become newly credible sources of information and analysis for professional journalists and the public (Davis, 2009), the netroots still may require professional journalists for validation, or the standing and legitimation that legacy media grant to political actors. At the same time, the netroots may still need the professional press to widen the scope of conflict outside of its ideological niche, particularly with regard to the interest groups that may share similar policy and strategic goals but are not expressly affiliated with the movement.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents an initial attempt at understanding the strategic interactions of campaigns, movements, and the professional press in a networked information environment. Interviews revealed how much of the Obama campaign's symbolic new media work during the primaries can be conceptualized in terms of "network building." The resources brought to bear in what are sometimes hourly contests over the meaning of the election were not so much permanently arranged as called into being quickly and for extremely short time periods based on already established relationships, the political context, and interest alignment. For the campaign during the primaries, the netroots was particularly valued for its ability to access the Party's base, as actors in the movement have taken on an increasingly prominent role in the networks that help shape the outcomes of elections. Allies in the netroots served as a means for staffers to deliberately anonymize communications in the attempt to preserve the candidate's image and invest messaging with greater credibility.

This chapter demonstrates that campaigns and movements should be conceptualized as strategic actors, and sometimes allies, in crafting public discourse. As such, it also reveals that institutional electoral politics and social movement activism are often entwined, as individuals have overlapping memberships in the Democratic Party and netroots, take on different roles according to the political context, and craft hybrid repertoires of contentious action. An overemphasis on the visible new media communications of campaigns and movements, including e-mails to supporters and websites, has led to a general lack of consideration of the ways that these organizations interact to shape the public discourse around elections and contest public issues. As this chapter reveals, Obama's campaign staffers continually attempted to create and circulate media objects through allies in the netroots that mobilized supporters, persuaded undecideds, and defined their opponents for the professional press and general public. Patterns of diffusion of political messages were the result of these strategic interactions, not the structural features of the Internet (Anderson, 2010). The campaign had to account for the goals, information needs, and norms of the netroots movement, members of which were both autonomous and engaging in electoral politics according to their own political strategy and goals.

Together, the campaign and the netroots helped create and engaged in a dynamic field of communicative action around electoral politics, which in turn was also shaped by new media journalistic outlets and the legacy professional press. During the general election, the campaign sought to leverage the media forms of the netroots as vehicles for influencing

journalists. The campaign valued the professional press for both its reach in terms of the general public and the legitimacy that it conferred upon strategic communications. Getting a story into the AP was a goal, for instance, because its content appears in hundreds of newspapers across the country. Meanwhile, professional news outlets offered the legitimacy of an independent authority that direct communications with supporters or work through ideological allies simply lacked.

With the fragmented loyalties of the primaries behind them, the campaign and actors in the netroots collaborated to define the stakes of the election and opposing candidates. The campaign seeded its network of netroots actors, aggregators such as *The Drudge Report*, new media outlets such as Politico, and social platforms like *Digg* with content staffers hoped would win the day in terms of securing the narratives and audiences of professional, general interest journalism, the object of its network building and strategic communications work. In the process, the campaign created a profusion of new opportunities to not only disseminate and promote content, but also elide its origin, making it appear as the work of amateur citizens and professional news gathering.

NOTES

1. The netroots' identity as a movement arose out of online activism around the Dean campaign. In the winter of 2002, Jerome Armstrong, the founder of the blog *MyDD*, coined and subsequently popularized the term ''netroots'' to refer to online supporters of Dean's candidacy. Armstrong was the de facto head of the independent efforts among Democrats disaffected with their Party's establishment to promote Dean's candidacy online, particularly as the candidate began to attract attention for his stance against the Iraq War that marked his insurgent candidacy. By early 2003, a network of blogs including *MyDD*, DailyKos, and the independent, supporter-run *Howard Dean 2004* were routinely delivering funds and volunteers to the campaign, constituting the candidate's early web presence. For more details, see Kreiss (2012) and Kerbel (2009).
2. Hindman (2008) characterizes blogging as a vehicle for intra-elite competition.
3. As Sides and Farrell (2010) have demonstrated, blog posts on DailyKos are associated with increased candidate fundraising.
4. Subjects were well aware and informed of any potential reputation risks in this case. The subjects for this study were mostly political professionals, well versed in campaign strategy, skilled in dealing with the press, and occupying powerful positions in consultancies or the administration.
5. Staffers argued that the data presented here would have little consequence for the 2012 reelection campaign. First, from a strategic standpoint, staffers suggested that what is reported here would be known to campaign operatives on both sides of the aisle. Second, the tactics of strategic campaign communications have evolved since 2008 to

encompass new platforms such as Twitter. Third, unlike the unreported data, staffers believe that the information presented here has minimal risk of causing press controversy.

6. Staffers took pains to emphasize that they never created any content that they then attributed to the staffers of other campaigns, nor did they ever accuse other campaigns of racism (in part, this was given the fear that accusations of racism would ultimately undermine Obama).

7. The campaign's perception of the blogosphere's influence largely accords with the results of David Karpf's measurement of the "blogosphere authority index," found at http://www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com/

8. Townhouse was a Sunday bar meeting turned invitation-only e-mail list founded shortly after the 2004 elections by a veteran of the Draft Wesley Clark effort. For the role of Townhouse in the netroots, see Karpf (2012).

9. For a wider discussion of the internal dynamics of the site, see Shaw (2010).

10. For a discussion of the evolution of this practice, see dKosopedia at http://www.dkosopedia.com/wiki/Daily_Kos_Front_Pagers

11. See Karpf (2012) for a discussion of the importance of this system. In 2011, DailyKos switched to a custom platform called DK4.

12. A campaign staffer suggested that this practice was similar to the way that Obama campaign surrogates appearing on television shows would receive talking points and ideas from staffers, choose which they wanted to convey, and then deliver them with the legitimacy of being independents and not official campaign staffers.

13. The rapid response team received a significant amount of media attention. For the staffers involved, see George Washington University's campaign staffing database at http://www.gwu.edu/~action/2008/obama/obamaorggen.html. For specific actions, see Hosenball (2008).

14. As numerous published reports have noted, organized groups have long been able to game the *Digg* algorithm in this way.

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