Acting in the networked public sphere: the Obama campaign’s strategic use of new media to shape narratives of the 2008 presidential race

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Abstract

While many scholars provide analytical accounts of the "networked public sphere," little is known about how campaigns, movements, and advocacy groups act within it to create and shape public narratives. Sociotechnical changes over the last decade have resulted in new openings for actors to produce political culture. To analyze strategic action in this new networked public sphere, this paper provides an in-depth look at the new media messaging practices of the 2008 Obama campaign. Through interviews with staffers, volunteers, and vendors, this paper details the campaign’s goals for strategic messaging in the networked public sphere, the interaction of actors within it, and the sociotechnical dynamics on new media sites and within ecosystems that helped shape what content gets attention. I argue that during the primaries, the campaign worked to influence discourse and win audiences among the activists and bloggers within the progressive ‘netroots,’ what Todd Gitlin has described as the “movement wing of the Democratic Party.” For the general election, the campaign ‘seeded’ new media outlets, circulating information to its network of ideological allies and new journalism sites in the hopes of winning the day in terms of securing the narratives, audiences, and legitimacy of professional, general interest journalism. To achieve these goals, much of staffers’ work involved what I call ‘network building,’ or the creation, cultivation, and maintenance of ties between autonomous allies that can be mobilized for informational purposes.
As Barack Obama spoke to the nation for the first time as president-elect, he attributed his historic victory to “the millions of Americans who volunteered, and organized, and proved that more than two centuries later, a government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth.” Many scholars have rightly pointed to the role of an extraordinary array of online campaign tools and social media platforms such as Facebook in providing citizens with an unprecedented number of opportunities to get involved in the campaign (Burch, 2009; Cogburn, Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Harris, Moffitt, and Squires, 2010; Levenshus, 2010; Lipton, 2008; Love and Musikawong, 2009). Others note how these technologies offered the campaign new means to target particular groups of voters, and even individuals, with messages delivered through email and online advertising that both spoke to their concerns and spurred them to action (Carty, 2010; AUTHOR and Howard, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2010).

These scholarly works generally explore how the campaign used new media to route around the professional press and commune directly with supporters. While this was an important part of Obama’s new media practice, scholars and journalists have paid far less attention to the campaign’s indirect communication: staffers’ use of new media intermediaries as conduits of strategic messaging. These intermediaries between the campaign and the public included progressive bloggers such as DailyKos, new online journalism outlets such as Politico and the partisan The Huffington Post, aggregators such as The Drudge Report, and legacy media sites such as those run by newspapers and cable news channels. These intermediaries make up a large part of what Benkler (2006) has influentially described as the “networked public sphere,” or the new space of public discourse constituted through digital and networked communications technologies. As Benkler argues, in contrast with the broadcast era, where only a few
professional gatekeepers could address publics, citizens and civil society and social movement organizations now have a host of new opportunities to gather and interact with elites to produce political culture in the networked public sphere.

All of which suggests that campaigns and the movement allies that opportunistically assemble around them (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010) act within a new sociotechnical and symbolic terrain. For example, in the classic *The Whole World is Watching*, Gitlin (1980) argued that by the early 1970s the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and with it much of the New Left, had come apart at the seams under the gaze of mass media journalists. The framing of the SDS in media coverage, and the norms of ‘newsworthiness’ among professional journalists, shaped understandings of the organization for the public, other political actors, and even the activists themselves. Gitlin argued that SDS members trusted media accounts of the movement more than their own direct experience and adopted a highly performative, mostly symbolic style of protest to garner coverage. Many scholars have followed Gitlin in analyzing the interaction of movements and legacy media institutions, showing how organizations attempt to gain professional press coverage (Andrews and Caren, 2010) and frame issues for the professional press (Rohlinger, 2002). Other scholars have looked to how social movement organizations leverage professional journalistic attention to gain material and symbolic resources (Andrews and Biggs, 2006; Rohlinger, 2007) and legitimate causes and issues (Ferree, 2003).

The picture of the public sphere that Gitlin paints is, however, increasingly unrecognizable to the activists who came of age in the digital era. Networked digital media provide channels that afford symbolic and social action in ways unthinkable during the time of the SDS (*for a review, see* Earl et al., 2010). Activists have greater opportunities to both represent
and make themselves visible to each other. They can, in turn, coordinate national action through new media platforms to an unprecedented degree. All of which suggests that activists today have greater agency to shape and create media narratives, and thus public understandings, of candidates, social movements, and matters of public concern.

This paper provides an initial look into how political campaigns perceive the networked public sphere, craft their communications goals, interact with ideological allies, and engage in strategic new media work to shape the content and tone of public debate. I draw my evidence from interviews with a number of former staffers from various divisions within the 2008 Obama campaign organization as well as volunteers and vendors for the campaign. From their accounts, I piece together the contexts within which staffers acted, their perception of new opportunities for shaping public debate, and the dynamic relationships between actors in the networked public sphere. The Obama campaign is not representative of all campaigns. Indeed, given the resources the campaign deployed and expertise it gathered, it is a highly exceptional case. That said, the campaign’s new media work is widely studied, emulated, and taught within the practitioner community. As such, the campaign is an aspirational model, and its work suggests where the field is heading.

This paper proceeds in four parts. I begin by discussing the separate literatures on the networked public sphere and new media and political communication. I argue that while a robust, interdisciplinary body of work has detailed the uptake of new media for direct campaign-to-citizen communications through technologies such as email, websites, and online advertising, very few studies have considered the work of campaigns with the varied intermediaries in the networked public sphere. This is surprising given an older, developed body of work on how
campaigns strive to control information flows for the professional press.

I then turn to the methods for this study before providing a detailed discussion of the way the 2008 Obama campaign acted within the networked public sphere. During the primaries, the campaign sought to influence the online Democratic activists that make up what scholars broadly refer to as the ‘netroots’ (a portmanteau of internet and grassroots). Gitlin (2008) argues that these activists, who raise significant funds and take action through online organizations such as MoveOn and blogs such as DailyKos, now form “the movement wing of the Democratic Party.” I show how the campaign focused much of its efforts during the primaries on network building within the netroots, or the creation, cultivation, and maintenance of ties with autonomous allies that could be mobilized for informational and resource purposes. Meanwhile, I argue that during the general election the campaign seeded new media outlets, strategically providing content to its network of allies and new online journalistic sites in the attempt to influence the professional, general interest press and gain access to the wider electorate. The professional press not only had the ability to reach this wider public, it also conferred legitimacy upon the campaign’s strategic communications. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings.

The Networked Public Sphere and Political Communication

In recent years there has been much work on the structure and dynamics of the networked public sphere. Technological change and shifts in social practice have expanded the possibilities for participation in political discourse. Comparing the networked public sphere to previous “industrial models” of communication, Benkler (2006) argues that citizens enjoy newfound opportunities to express themselves politically and speak to global audiences. This does not mean, however, that every voice is equally heard. Benkler (ibid.) argues that “iterative
pyramiding” characterizes the flow of information in the networked public sphere, where the conversations of specialized and small traffic sites scale upward to general interest outlets with much broader audiences. At the top of these pyramids are the new media sites that receive the most traffic and links from their peers. For example, within a highly ideologically segregated (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, 2010) and differentially structured (Kerbel, 2009; Benkler and Shaw, 2010) political blogosphere, there are new informational elites on both the left and right that garner disproportionate amounts of traffic and links.

These structures of attention afford collective social and symbolic action. Highly visible sites serve as “organizational hubs” that concentrate resources and attention (Lev-On and Hardin, 2008). A number of scholars, for instance, have looked into these dynamics within the progressive netroots, detailing the new media hubs that mobilize and concentrate the efforts of Democrats disaffected with the actions of Party elites.2 Within the netroots, ideologically left partisan media outlets such as The Huffington Post and the progressive blog DailyKos are particularly influential sites for developing political discourse and goals, as well as mobilization vehicles around events, issues, and candidates (Karpf, 2008, forthcoming). As the largest progressive blog with millions of page views every month, thousands of independent diarists contributing content to the site, and millions of dollars raised for progressive candidates over the last decade, DailyKos in particular has been the subject of a number of scholarly analyses documenting its central role in the netroots and its internal dynamics (Karpf, forthcoming; Shaw, 2010).

Alongside these new, elite netroots intermediaries, there are the legacy, general interest journalistic institutions that continue to attract the majority of online traffic (Hindman, 2006).
Indeed, Hindman’s empirical account of the networked public sphere shows how online outlets are more concentrated in terms of traffic than broadcast media, helping national elite journalistic outlets such as *The New York Times* and *CNN* expand their reach online. Compared to the progressive netroots, these sites not only enjoy larger traffic, they also have qualitatively different audiences. While sites such as *DailyKos* draw ideologically aligned audiences (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, 2010), legacy journalism outlets appeal more to the general public, although online activists remain dependent on their original reporting (Leskovec et al., 2009).

Even as scholars have gained purchase on the macro-structures and dynamics of the networked public sphere, a comparatively few number of works explore how activists and organizations act within it to achieve their communications goals. In one of the few studies to do so, Karpf (2008) reveals how the circulation of the George Allen “Macaca” video and its eventual uptake by professional journalists was a product of coordinated, communicative action by 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. Meanwhile, Anderson (2011) shows how activists ‘working the press’ and journalists and bloggers seeking traffic together shaped the narrative of a contentious political episode in Philadelphia. These works reveal how actors strategically engage in the networked public sphere in pursuit of larger goals. For the progressive netroots, promoting the Macaca video served the ends of partisan mobilization and opposition framing of a Republican Senate candidate. In Philadelphia, actors with very different motivations that ranged from activism to attention gathered around and helped create the dynamics of an episode of contention.
These works are exceptions in a much broader literature that focuses on how movements and campaigns leverage new media to communicate directly with supporters and citizens. For example, much work on new media and political communication in the context of electoral politics focuses on how beginning in the 1990s campaigns used websites to provide information to undecided voters and, by the turn of the century, mobilize supporters (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Foot and Schneider, 2006). During the 2004 elections, campaigns supplemented their websites with email and blogs (Bennett, 2008; AUTHOR, 2008; Chadwick, 2007; Gronbeck and Wiese, 2005; Iyengar, 2011). Meanwhile, campaigns have diversified their communication strategies to keep up with the incredible fragmentation of audiences given the proliferation of online and offline channels (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). This has involved campaigns going multi-platform, using online advertising (Turow, 2006) to target voters where they consume media, internal platforms such as MyBarackObama.com and external commercial sites such as Facebook to fashion their supporters’ social networks into conduits of strategic communications (AUTHOR, forthcoming), and YouTube to make videos go viral (Wallsten, 2010).

These works, then, have mostly been concerned with one-way communications between campaigns and supporters that are easily identifiable as campaign messages. Indeed, the emphasis of this scholarly work has been squarely on how campaigns use new media to route around the professional press and frame candidates and the electoral race for supporters and the public in direct ways. And yet, as the empirical discussion of this paper suggests, in addition to these direct communication practices, the Obama campaign developed more subtle, and often anonymous, ways of acting in the networked public sphere.
Methods

I draw my evidence for this paper from an in-progress book project (AUTHOR, forthcoming) which details the history of new media and Democratic Party politics over the last decade. To understand how campaigns perceive and navigate the new intermediaries of the networked public sphere, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with twenty-one former staffers, volunteers, and vendors of the 2008 Obama campaign. I purposively selected interviewees on the basis of their positions in the Obama campaign organization as revealed by Federal Election Commission filings. I also asked these individuals for recommendations as to whom else to contact. Participants included many senior-level staffers and volunteers operating in different divisions of the campaign organization including Field, New Media, and Communications. In addition, I interviewed a number of project-based consultants and staffers of technology vendors that provided services to the campaign. These interviews lasted between one and four hours and took place in person and on the telephone or through internet services such as Skype. I recorded and transcribed all of these interviews for accuracy purposes.

All interviews were ‘on-the-record,’ although participants could declare any statement ‘off-the-record’ (i.e.: not to be reported) or ‘on background’ (i.e.: not attributed) at their discretion. While subjects going ‘off-the-record’ or ‘on background’ occurred very rarely in practice during the larger book project, this paper relies on the outlier evidence from these interviews. The findings reported here are based on information provided by subjects who wished that they remain anonymous, but whom offered their words for direct quotation and background. Subjects cited the sensitive nature of the findings here, particularly in light of the framing of Obama as a transformational, ‘above the partisan fray’ candidate. Subjects also were not comfortable going ‘on-the-record’ given the 2012 election campaign.
Findings: Strategic Interventions in the Networked Public Sphere
The Obama campaign used new media directly for the purposes of building support among the electorate, persuading undecided voters, and commune with supporters (Knorr Cetina, 2008). Less visible, however, were the campaign’s strategic interventions in the networked public sphere in the attempt to shape public discourse and frame opposing candidates. To document these communication practices, first I discuss the different goals of the campaign for the primaries and general election. I then turn to the efforts of staffers to create and cultivate allies within the progressive netroots to circulate the campaign’s content among Party activists. Finally, I detail how these allies and other new media outlets were important conduits to the general interest press.

Strategic Goals
The campaign engaged in strategic communications work with intermediaries throughout the election. The goal was not to destroy opponents, but in the words of one staffer to “move the needle incrementally.” In practice, this meant that staffers attempted to produce and circulate new media content that framed the candidate and his primary and general election opponents in an advantageous light for the Obama campaign. Staffers sought to shape discussion of the election and achieve wider exposure for their opposition research. This work entailed everything from releasing the candidate’s birth certificate online to amplifying comments and content produced by Clinton supporters that would portray them in a questionable light.3

Much of this strategic communications work had to be done anonymously given the campaign’s carefully constructed narrative of Obama as a new kind of post-partisan candidate. Central to Obama’s story was that he rose above the political fray, found pragmatic solutions to problems that transcended ideology, and offered the tantalizing possibility for transformational
‘change’ from polarized politics. The candidate, for instance, ostensibly forswear negative campaigning, particularly when he shared the stage with his fellow Party members, any of whom could become the eventual nominee. All of which meant that any content that portrayed another candidate negatively had to be disseminated discretely, out of view of the press, lest there be charges of hypocrisy. Anonymity also offered the campaign the opportunity to capitalize on the reputation of the source, whether it was an elite respected blogger in the netroots or a professional journalist.

Importantly, campaign staffers crafted their goals for this messaging work in what Chadwick (2011) has analyzed as a “hybrid news system” that includes a range of legacy institutions such as the professional press and new actors such as blogs in the netroots. These actors follow different institutional rules for their production of political discourse. Professional journalists see their roles in terms of their ‘watchdog’ function (Deuze, 2005), looking to penetrate the backstages that orchestrate candidate performances (Alexander, 2010). Despite a pervasive distrust of journalists, campaigns perceive that their role as neutral third party custodians of the public interest invests their reports with unique legitimacy in the eyes of the public. By contrast, for bloggers in the netroots that are ideologically-motivated and have as their audience and contributors highly active, progressive Democrats, their goal is often political mobilization to defeat Republicans or influence Party politicians to adopt more progressive policy positions. In contexts when there is no clear consensus in the netroots, such as the 2008 primaries when elite bloggers were split between John Edwards, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton, these actors seek to persuade their ideological allies by advocating for their favored candidate or making the case against opponents.
Given this institutional context, and the exigencies of electoral politics, staffers stated that the Obama campaign had different objectives during the primaries and general election. During the primaries it was important to cultivate the netroots and speak to online activists on their own terms given that they were an important constituency that played a significant role in caucuses and primaries. As staffers were well aware, since the elections in 2004 the progressive netroots had emerged as a powerful new Democratic Party interest group. Community blogs such as DailyKos, group-edited blogs such as AmericaBlog, and partisan journalistic outlets such as Talking Points Memo help coordinate online collective action such as fundraising and volunteering as well as shape political debate within a highly active segment of the Party.

For the general election, with consensus within the netroots behind the Democratic Party standard-bearer, the campaign’s primary objective was to leverage blogs and new media outlets such as Politico to reach the general interest press. News outlets such as NBC and the Associated Press have broader audiences than political blogs in terms of location, demographics, and political knowledge and interest. The campaign not only coveted the opportunity to speak to these audiences, it sought the legitimacy that professional journalists seemingly offered. The netroots offered channels for content to make it into professional media because in a hybrid news system actors are mutually dependent (Chadwick, 2011). Professional political reporters look to blogs as key indexes of partisan, activist debate and sources of valuable information (Drezner and Farrell, 2008). With the pressing demand for new content, meanwhile, journalists constantly need to monitor the networked public sphere and find things to report on or risk being behind a story (Deuze, 2007.)

Network Building
In this institutional and electoral context, online channels for circulating information were
particularly valuable to the campaign. Staffers sought to both strategically leverage the reputations of other actors in the networked public sphere and have ways of promoting, not just disseminating, anonymous information. Staffers perceived that a video posted on the campaign’s blog, for instance, would be received very differently than if a large, highly credible progressive blogger made it available. Meanwhile, staffers had many channels for uploading anonymous content, such as YouTube, but it very rarely goes viral on its own. Content needs to be promoted to be widely disseminated.

To disseminate and promote its strategic messaging, much of the work of staffers involved network building, the cultivation of a stable group of autonomous allies to serve as conduits for the campaign’s communications. These allies ranged from reporters at new media journalistic outlets such as The Huffington Post and influential progressive bloggers with highly visible platforms in the netroots to independent supporter groups on sites such as DailyKos and on sites such as Digg. Creating and maintaining these ties was an organizational achievement. The interactions between the campaign and sites in the netroots reveal much more complicated dynamics than simple coordination between ideological allies.

For its part, the campaign wanted to secure access to powerful platforms for messaging and opportunities to disseminate content that staffers did not want to be publicly sourced back to the campaign. For example, one of staffers’ favorite platforms for videos that framed the opposition in advantageous ways was YouTube. The video-sharing site enabled staffers to post completely anonymous and untraceable videos. During the primaries, staffers created short YouTube videos intended to amplify the gaffes, perceived ‘flip-flops’, and attacks on Obama 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 a short web video to create a highlight reel. At times, staffers also suggested video ideas to friendly bloggers. Campaign staffers relied on its blogger allies, meanwhile, to promote these videos. The mere presence of a video on YouTube does not guarantee that it will be seen. Staffers were therefore reliant upon elite bloggers to promote their videos, especially given that they could not be featured on the blog where it was off limits to say anything derogatory about another candidate. The goal was to make videos go ‘viral’ and circulate throughout the blogosphere and ultimately, as noted in greater detail below, make their way to the professional press. To do so, staffers would post videos anonymously on YouTube and reach out to identified blog supporters and ask them to link to and talk about them.

Bloggers would not automatically do the campaign’s bidding, however. These relationships had to be cultivated given that the campaign’s allies among elite bloggers were not only independent, they had their own political goals, information needs, and status concerns. As such, the relationship between the Obama campaign and the netroots was symbiotic, where each found the relationship mutually beneficial. For their part, as a group bloggers wanted to be taken seriously as an important interest group in Democratic politics and have influence over strategy and policy. Bloggers also face enormous pressure to continually have new information and be constantly generating content. And, while bloggers see themselves in terms of their group identity as part of the progressive netroots, individuals establish and maintain their reputations through access to Party elites.

Given these dynamics, one of the primary ways the campaign secured vehicles for the circulation of its content was through offering bloggers informational exclusives, much like candidates do with favored reporters. For these bloggers, exclusives both help promote their
sites and elevate (or cement) their status in the internally-competitive netroots. For instance, the campaign often released new videos intended for Obama’s *YouTube* channel to the influential *Crooks and Liars* first, because the blog’s authors focused on video exclusives and the campaign wanted to cultivate that relationship. Other blogs and individuals the campaign developed relationships with for this purpose were *America Blog*, *FireDogLake*, and Sam Stein at *The Huffington Post*. Campaign staffers also actively cultivated prominent progressive bloggers, providing them with information and research when they asked for it and responding when they were angry with the candidate or the campaign.

The campaign’s use of all these techniques for network building were readily apparent in staffers’ work with *DailyKos*. Given the extensive use of metrics within the campaign (AUTHOR, forthcoming), staffers knew that *DailyKos* was by far the largest blog driver of traffic to the campaign’s website. Even more, staffers viewed *DailyKos* as the leading information distribution hub for progressives, setting much of the political agenda for the netroots. With *DailyKos*’s outsized importance, the campaign sought to maintain good ties with Markos Moulitsas, the founder. To this end, the campaign rewarded Moulitsas with one of the larger exclusives of the campaign: Obama’s birth certificate. *DailyKos* published a scan on June 12, 2008, making it the first media outlet to make it public. Indeed, the fact that the campaign provided Moulitsas with this information over more established, professional journalists reveals how highly the campaign valued these outlets within the netroots.

With their independence and sense of themselves as a prominent Party interest group, informational exclusives alone were not adequate to secure the support of progressive bloggers. Indeed, the relationship between the progressive netroots and the campaign was not always rosy.
Members of the netroots were acutely conscious of perceived slights to their newfound clout, a sentiment born of their very recent coming of age as a defined and powerful group of loosely coordinated progressive bloggers and online advocacy organizations. Through the money and resources the netroots commanded during the midterm elections in 2006, these actors were increasingly taken seriously by elites. Indeed, an offshoot conference of DailyKos, YearlyKos (now ‘Netroots Nation’), hosted all of the major Democratic Party candidates for a debate in the summer of 2007, a significant measure of their growing power and visibility.

Meanwhile, the Obama campaign held the netroots - and much of the Party’s traditional organizational allies such as unions - at arms length. This was an outgrowth of the campaign’s desire to control its field efforts, messaging, and fundraising, as well as have independence from what could prove to be, at times, recalcitrant allies. This decision had few repercussions given the massive mobilization around Obama candidacy, which rendered much of the fundraising and volunteer power of the netroots generally irrelevant. Numerous staffers cited, with pride, that as a campaign they “completely went around” fundraising intermediaries such as the netroots online donation site ActBlue that have been so crucial to down-ballot and insurgent candidacies.

Indeed, throughout much of 2007 the campaign did not have much of a choice but to draw upon other sources of support given that John Edwards had captured the imagination of much of the netroots. As such, many members of the netroots resented that they did not have a voice in the campaign, or even a representative of their interests comparable to those of older Democratic Party interest groups. One campaign staffer, for instance, recalled a conversation with a prominent member of an online advocacy organization who argued that the netroots was not being treated with anything near the same respect as unions or women’s groups given that they
had high level staff representation of their interests.

The campaign therefore had to respond to its perceived lack of attentiveness to this community. To this end, staffers read a number of the candidate’s speeches in advance, and at times worked with Obama’s 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 proactively contacted prominent bloggers to justify decisions made by the campaign if they ran counter to long held positions within the netroots. For example, staffers had to prepare Moulitsas of DailyKos and other netroots bloggers after the candidate accepted an invitation to appear on FOXNews. The netroots had long argued that Democratic appearances on the partisan news outlet legitimize it as a fair journalistic venue. To assuage their frustration with Obama’s decision, one staffer contacted Moulitsas to solicit a list of things that he thought Bill O’Reilly was going to ask him, particularly in relation to the candidate’s relationship with bloggers. The staffer subsequently passed this along to Obama’s prep team for the interview.

This suggests how netroots concerns made their way into the rhetoric of the candidate at times, even as the campaign leveraged progressive blogs as venues for its messaging. Staffers also sought to influence elite bloggers by participating in the backchannels that helped these individuals coordinate their political discourse and activities. For example, staffers participated in and worked through cultivated allies on Townhouse and other prominent blogger listservs that have as their members netroots bloggers, consultants, and online activists. 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. This was important given that these debates often shaped the
content on a host of different progressive blogs. For example, if a particular blogger attacked the candidate, staffers would provide an ally with a response or information rebutting the claims.

Relationships with elite bloggers were not the only ones the campaign cultivated. As important as the tie with the founder of *DailyKos* was, staffers realized that the technical design of this group blog and the social practices it supported created other avenues for promoting the campaign’s content.6 *DailyKos* has a series of independent contributing editors and featured writers, selected by Moulitsas or nominated by the community itself.7 At times, the campaign contacted these writers directly to disseminate content, such as with Obama’s birth certificate. However, staffers most often worked through the diary and commenting systems. 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 Kos website.)8 This functionality of the *DailyKos* platform, along with an attendant social organization that utilized it, resulted in a sprawling community of thousands of diarists. The Scoop platform also featured an extensive reputation system for diaries and comments. Registered users could ‘recommend’ diaries. If they received enough votes, diaries made it onto the front page in the ‘recommended diaries’ sidebar, securing them millions of page views. Comments could also be rated positively or negatively, with this reputation accruing to the user. All these ‘votes’ for content, meanwhile, are weighted based on whether the user has a high reputation on the site.

Staffers took advantage of this social and technical infrastructure, building relationships with supporters that were regular diarists or commentators on the site to promote the campaign’s content. For instance, staffers were invited to an email list for the *DailyKos* members that had independently formed a group on the site called ‘Kossacks for Obama.’ As a group they worked to promote each others’ diaries and vote positively for each others’ comments, helping increase
their visibility. Sometimes campaign staffers wrote their own diaries, and relied on these supporters to promote them. At other times, the campaign developed content and passed it directly along to popular diarists so it would circulate with the legitimacy of an independent community writer. This content ranged from substantive blog posts on policy to humorous items such as photoshops lampooning 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.

In actively maintaining this presence on DailyKos and cultivating supporters, the campaign also took advantage of the informational opportunities the site 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 email stating that Obama was a muslim who attended a madrassa as a child. The Obama campaign discovered this forwarded email through a sympathizer who found it in a comment on DailyKos. A staffer subsequently passed it along in secret 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.

Seeding New Media Outlets

A number of significant structural changes in the Obama campaign organization occurred during the general election. There was, in general, a much more professionalized and tighter communications operation staffed by a bevy of newly hired outside experts. In communications
alone, the campaign hired a number of new staffers including new regional and Black, Latino, and Asian communications directors. The campaign also created a rapid response team responsible for vetting all external communications. Made up of staffers from the communications, research, and new media divisions, the campaign tasked the team with responding to attacks from Republicans and crafting their own to shape press coverage. The rapid response team also vetted much of the campaign’s other communications with the press and supporters.

These new staffers responsible for managing day-to-day external communications placed their emphasis on shaping professional press coverage during the general election. Professional press outlets continue to command the largest and most desirable audiences, especially those individuals less attuned to politics. Meanwhile, staffers saw professional journalists as having a unique legitimacy in the eyes of the public as the third party arbiters of the election, particularly for those less ideologically committed. In other words, 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 that gathered around new media journalistic sites such as Politico.

While their audiences were not ends in themselves, the new outlets in the networked public sphere were valuable conduits to the professional press. During the general election, the campaign seeded these new media outlets with content in the attempt to capture the attention of professional journalists. For example, if staffers judged a piece of information to not be intrinsically newsworthy to professional journalists, such as a tidbit of opposition research, staffers sent it to its network of progressive blog allies in the hopes that their conversations would lead general interest outlets to see it in a different light. Alternatively, discussions on progressive blogs might capture the attention of new media or cable journalistic outlets with
specialized audiences, such as Matt Drudge of *The Drudge Report*, Ben Smith from *Politico*, or Keith Olberman from MSNBC, all of whom regularly monitored the leading blogs.

With political reporters throughout the country among their most important readerships, new media outlets such as *The Drudge Report* and *Politico* were important conduits to the larger national news ecosystem in their own right. Staffers sought to shape the content on these sites by not only seeding friendly venues in the netroots, but through the time-honored strategy of providing these new media outlets with exclusives to cultivate relationships, preclude future negative stories, and generate damaging press coverage about an 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, these outlets were particularly receptive to information the campaign provided. Sometimes staffers leveraged aggregation sites in attempts to get their content picked up by these new media outlets, knowing that coordinated communicative action can often help make content go ‘viral’. For example, staffers cultivated a group of ‘Diggers for Obama’ 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 new media staffers requested it in the hopes that this content would become one of Digg’s most promoted articles, ensuring millions of additional page views.10 Staffers knew that even if new media journalists at *The Drudge Report* or *Politico* did not see this content as significant, they would often write stories about what was being discussed online.

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. There were tiers of professional press outlets, with audience size and demographics particularly important to the campaign. Staffers, for instance, sought favorable coverage and story placement in the *Associated Press*
(AP), which they saw as the ultimate arbiter of influence during the general election because people were exposed to its articles 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. The AP also 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 that is when less-committed, more independent, less knowledgable, and centrist voters tuned into the presidential race. As one staffer described the campaign’s communications strategy:

The ultimate gold standard was basically seeing 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 channels, 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 journalistic 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 at progressive sites such as Media Matters, a media monitoring site run by the think tank Think Progress.

Discussion
To date, much scholarly research has focused on how campaigns and social movements use new media to recruit and communicate with supporters. In their extensive history of new media in electoral contexts, for example, Foot and Schneider (2006) document the evolution of candidate web pages and the practices behind them, from speaking to undecided voters to
mobilizing supporters. In their typology of internet activism, meanwhile, Earl et al. (2010) analyze internet usage in terms of education (“brochure-ware”), online facilitation of offline activism, online participation, and online organizing.

This work captures the range of ends that campaigns, and movements, have taken up new media for. Less well understood, however, is how campaigns strategically act within a networked public sphere that includes an extraordinary new set of cultural producers. This includes offline media that are now online such as CNN, internet news sites run by professional journalists such as *Politico*, new partisan media outlets such *DailyKos*, and the host of amateur voices that create much of the content, but have little of the audiences, within the blogosphere. Indeed, much of the literature proceeds as if campaigns are both separate and apart from the networked public sphere and largely subject to the narratives created by these other discursive actors.

As the preceding findings suggest, campaigns should be conceptualized as strategic actors within the networked public sphere. An over-emphasis upon the visible new media communications of campaigns, including emails to supporters and websites, has elided the ways campaigns work to shape public discourse of elections. The literature that emphasizes the tactics campaigns and other political actors use to shape print and broadcast news coverage takes on new relevance in a contemporary media environment marked by the proliferation of new actors. As scholars have noted, campaigns and other strategic actors seek to control flows of information through strategic leaks (Esser and D’Angelo, 2003; Kaufman, 2002; Jenkins, 2003) and cultivate relationships with key reporters (Startt, 2004).

What has changed is that campaigns now have a range of new means through which to
shape public discourse that amplify these earlier practices. Strategic leaks of content to online activists and journalists working for specialized new media outlets not only build and cultivate relationships, they serve as distribution points into the wider new media ecosystem. Importantly, campaigns have more ways of anonymizing their strategic communications than in the days when reporters on the bus were the gatekeepers for much of the information on elections (Crouse, 1974). The origins of political information are more easily obscured in the contemporary media environment when content can be posted anonymously to sites such as YouTube and hidden coordinated action can help it go ‘viral,’ making it seem like a uniquely grassroots and participatory phenomenon occurring among citizens themselves. Meanwhile, the networked public sphere features new patterns of information diffusion that should be understood as the result of strategic interaction, not structural features of the internet (Anderson, 2010). As this study made clear, the Obama campaign had highly developed means of seeding new media to influence the professional press.

Providing journalists with anonymous background or opposition research to generate negative press coverage about an opponent is a time-honored campaign practice. As the number of actors involved in setting the public agenda has increased, campaigns have new access points for circulating untraceable communication. Once limited to targeted, individual contacts such as telephone calls to reporters, campaigns now have a bevy of partisan new media outlets to circulate their wares and attract widespread attention. And, with many new potential gates, strategic messaging has the opportunity to reach a national audience faster than before.

Given these dynamics, many scholarly assumptions about the networked public sphere may be wrong. This includes the widespread beliefs that political discourse is now uniquely shaped by ‘amateur’ production, that this networked public sphere is uniquely democratic, and
that professional press values and outlets are in decline. New means for anonymous communication means that much of what we take to be produced by amateurs (or even professional journalists) may in fact be strategically made to appear as such by organized political interests. The power of coordinated, interested communicative action challenges meritocratic notions of the networked public sphere, where content receives attention based on the quality of the work. Finally, scholars who have forecasted, and even implicitly celebrate, the decline of professional press values and outlets, overlook the power of their legitimacy and their continued ability to powerfully concentrate attention beyond the interested partisans of the new media sphere (Prior, 2007). Indeed, the emerging value systems of the networked public sphere, where ideology, status, and information needs take precedence over generalized conceptions of the public interest, may paradoxically invest the professional press with greater legitimacy in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The focus of scholars and journalists writing about the Obama campaign focuses on how it used new media to directly communicate with citizens. Email, mobile text messaging, and online advertising all received outsized attention as new media channels that enabled the campaign to route around intermediaries such as the press and Democratic interest groups and target citizens to define its message, persuade undecideds, and mobilize supporters.

While this was an important part of the campaign’s new media work, other staffers used back channels to disseminate the campaign’s messages far less directly. This paper presented an initial foray into understanding strategic action in the networked public sphere. To do so, I showed how the Obama campaign’s staffers perceived the new media environment and acted in
pursuit of their communications goals. For staffers, the information needs and status concerns of bloggers created opportunities that they leveraged to their advantage to disseminate content. The bloggers of the netroots, meanwhile, benefitted in terms of gaining access to the campaign, content to keep their audiences engaged, and, most broadly, furthered their own partisan goals. The campaign and ideologically-aligned bloggers acted symbiotically, each deriving mutual benefit from the other’s strategic action and interests.

As this paper argued, much of the campaign’s work in the networked public sphere can be conceptualized in terms of network building, as staffers worked to build and cultivate relationships with allies to use as resources to disseminate and promote particular content. These acts of network building and maintenance strengthen ties between allies and help them align their communicative goals. In what are often daily messaging wars between campaigns, the resources brought to bear in the networked public sphere are 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, its network of ideological allies was important for its own sake during the primaries, when the partisans of the netroots were a particularly valued source of financial, human, and discursive resources. These allies also served as a means for staffers to deliberately anonymize communications in the attempt preserve the candidate’s image and invest messaging with greater credibility.

Meanwhile, the campaign largely approached professional journalists as the object of its network building work. During the general election, 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. In valuing the general interest press in this way, the Obama campaign
resembles its predecessors through the ages. Campaigns have long sought to have content become fodder for professional journalists for both their reach and the unique institutional role they play in public affairs. Campaigns value the *Associated Press* because its stories appear in hundreds of newspapers across the country. Meanwhile, professional news outlets offer the legitimacy of an independent authority that direct communications with supporters or work through allies simply lacks.

This paper, then, offered an analytical perspective on strategic action in a new communications environment. It did so through the first empirical look into how the Obama campaign acted in the networked public sphere. Campaigns, and movements, have had to learn to navigate the new - and old - voices and sources of authority that shape political culture in the networked public sphere.
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Throughout the text, to preserve anonymity I use the term ‘staffers’ as an umbrella term referring to all three sets of actors: paid staff, volunteers, and vendors.

For an account of the netroots’ ties to the Democratic Party, see Koger, Masket, and Noel (2010). For a more general history of the building of the Democratic Party over the last twenty-years, including the intersections between the ‘netroots’ and movement organizations such as MoveOn, see Galvin (2008).

Staffers took pains to emphasize that they never created any false content attributed to other campaign’s staffers, nor did they ever accuse other campaigns of racism. In part, this was given the fear that this accusations of racism would ultimately undermine Obama.

The campaign’s perception of influence in the blogosphere largely accords with the results of David Karpf’s measurement of the “blogosphere authority index.” See: http://www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com/

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 (forthcoming).

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

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

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

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).

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