

Obama's Wired Campaign: Lessons for Public Health Communication

LORIEN C. ABROMS AND R. CRAIG LEFEBVRE

Department of Prevention and Community Health, George Washington University, School of Public Health and Health Services, Washington, DC, USA

For those who still question the value of new media in public health campaigns, the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States can be instructive. Obama's campaign strategy has been heralded for its impressive ability to reach, engage, and inspire supporters. The high level of public involvement was evident in the record numbers of people who volunteered, donated money, and, most importantly, turned out to vote for Obama (Swanson, 2008). While there are clearly many factors that contributed to Obama's decisive win, including the demographics of his supporters, one contributing factor was his campaign's innovative use of new media (Gardner, 2008; Swanson, 2008)—defined as media that are based on the use of digital technologies such as the Internet, digital video, and mobile devices (Abroms, Schiavo, & Lefebvre, 2008). These technologies were used to gain supporters and to mobilize them into action in ways that were unprecedented and untested in political campaigns.

The Obama campaign's use of new media has relevance for how we conduct and build communities around our own public health campaigns. While previous political (Creamer, 2008; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Harnden, 2008) and public health campaigns (Hamilton, Dennings, & Abroms, 2008; Hoff, Mishel, & Rowe, 2008; Huhman, 2008; Taubenheim et al., 2008; Williams, Zraik, Schiavo, & Hatz, 2008) have made use of new media, Obama's presidential campaign, especially during the general election, took their application to a new level. The Obama campaign's use of new media was an evolution from prior presidential campaigns such as Governor Dean's 2004 campaign, which made extensive use of the Internet for grassroots fundraising. It also stemmed from Obama's own experience in the primary against Hillary Clinton, who also made use of new media in her campaign (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). It was during the general election campaign against John McCain, however, that the Obama campaign's new media "machine" got up and running at full speed and broke new ground for political campaigning (Vargas, 2008).

As such, an understanding of how new media was used by Obama in the general election is worthy of reflection. The Obama campaign's use of new media can be

The authors thank Silje Lier for her research assistance in putting together this article. This research was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health, 1K07CA124579, to Dr. Lorien Abroms.

Address correspondence to Lorien C. Abroms, Department of Prevention and Community Health, George Washington University (GWU), School of Public Health and Health Services, 2175 K St, NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037, USA. E-mail: Lorien@gwu.edu

grouped into those applications related to the following: (1) the campaign website, (2) the campaign TV channel, (3) social network sites, and (4) mobile phones. Also, part of the campaign media environment were (5) unofficial campaign materials created by supporters with new media. We will briefly describe each of these during the election campaign and, where available, provide indicators of use by the public (Table 1). Then, through the lens of public health communication, we will discuss what appears to have been effective about the campaign's new media efforts, and how future public health campaigns can learn from these strategies.

Campaign Website

The campaign's website, barackobama.com, was standard in many ways for a political campaign website. It contained links to the candidate's position on various issues, the biography of the candidate, and a place to donate funds to the campaign. The website also featured several novel applications that emphasized community involvement and organizing, housed under a section of the website called MyBO (for My Barack Obama). This password-protected section allowed people interested in being part of the campaign to register and then be part of a private community of supporters. In the MyBO community, supporters could communicate with fellow supporters, plan events using event-planning tools, fundraise with goal-setting tools, and blog about their feelings, both positive and negative, about the candidate and the campaign. It is noteworthy that the login box to the MyBO community was given a prominent position—it was placed front and center on the campaign homepage. By the close of the campaign, MyBO had 1.5 million registered Web volunteers who had organized over 100,000 events (Gardner, 2008).

Campaign TV Channel

Video clips featured prominently in digital campaign materials, including the campaign website and emails sent to supporters. These were coordinated under the campaign's BarackTV website and linked to the campaign's YouTube site. With over, 1,700 videos uploaded by November 2008, the videos on BarackTV were noteworthy for their sheer number (about five times more videos than the McCain Campaign (Owyang, 2008) and for their diversity of topics and outreach to special interest groups (Vargas, 2008). The content of the videos diverged from previous campaigns in that they emphasized stories of campaign volunteers and supporters, as well as the candidate. Numerous videos produced by the Obama campaign were primarily about campaign supporters. One example of such a video featured African American students in the Bronx who described their feelings about Obama's potential presidency (Vargas, 2008). Even videos that were primarily about the candidate, such as videos documenting Obama's stump speeches, began with images of people in the crowds and frequently cut to them listening to the speeches. By November 3, 2008, the Obama campaign videos had been viewed on YouTube over 18 million times, about nine times more than videos associated with the McCain campaign (Owyang, 2008).

Social Network Sites

Both the Obama campaign and the McCain campaign made use of social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace, but the Obama campaign set up their sites

Table 1. The Obama campaign's use of new media in campaign development

Media	Campaign activity	Indicators of use— official campaign	Indicators of use—supporter generated content
Campaign website	BarackObama.com MyBarackObama.com: Community blogs, event organizing tools, fundraising tools, opportunity to join groups (e.g., women for Obama, Veterans for Obama) and volunteer	1.5 million registered Web volunteers++++	8000 Obama Websites+++
YouTube channel	Barack TV—videos with emphasis on campaign supporters as well as Obama	YouTube Obama: + 1,792 videos uploaded 18,413,110 views McCain: + 329 videos uploaded 2,032,993 views	User generated videos:++ “I got a crush . . . on Obama”: 12,375,622 views “Yes we can”: 14,567,902 views
Social networking sites	Facebook and MySpace groups; AsianAve.com, MiGente.com, BlackPlanet.com	Facebook+: Obama: 2,379,102 friends McCain: 620,359 friends MySpace+: Obama: 833,161 friends McCain: 217,811 friends	Facebook: Obama: over 500 Facebook unofficial groups McCain: over 500 Facebook unofficial groups
Mobile	Campaign updates, opportunities to volunteer, and engage	Twitter+: @BarackObama: 112,474 followers @JohnMcCain: 4,603 followers	

Note: McCain statistics included where available for comparison purposes.

+Owyang, 2008.

++barelypolitical, 2007; WeCan08, 2008.

+++Swanson, 2008.

++++Gardner, 2008.

earlier and went further by also creating profiles on more targeted social network sites such as AsianAve.com, MiGente.com, and BlackPlanet.com. Even within a given social network site, the Obama profiles often were customized many times. For example, the Obama campaign created over 50 official Obama profiles on BlackPlanet.com, with at least one profile created for each state in the United States (Vargas, 2008). By November 2008, Obama had accrued 2,379,102 friends on Facebook, while McCain had only 620,359 friends. Similarly, on MySpace, Obama accrued 833,161 friends, while McCain had only 217,811 friends (Owyang, 2008).

Mobile

The campaign's mobile applications were launched in June 2007 and were upgraded in August of 2008 with the launch of Obama Mobile, a downloadable application for Blackberries and iPhones. With the use of geodemographic marketing, messages were targeted to users depending on their location (i.e., zip code) and characteristics, with those in swing states getting different messages than those in states that were likely to go Democrat.

Text messages sent to campaign supporters included regular updates on the campaign, as well as requests for involvement. Requests for involvement ranged from such small requests as "Watch the debate tonight" or "Please fwd msg" to larger requests such as "Reply if you will be in PA between now and the primary." Where possible, messages promoted two-way communication with campaign headquarters, such as, "Let us know your opinion on the debate." Messages also rewarded volunteers with insider information. Obama's Vice Presidential pick was announced at 3 a.m. by text message to about 2.9 million subscribers (Schatz, 2008; see Figure 1). The campaign also employed one of the latest text messaging platforms, Twitter, to

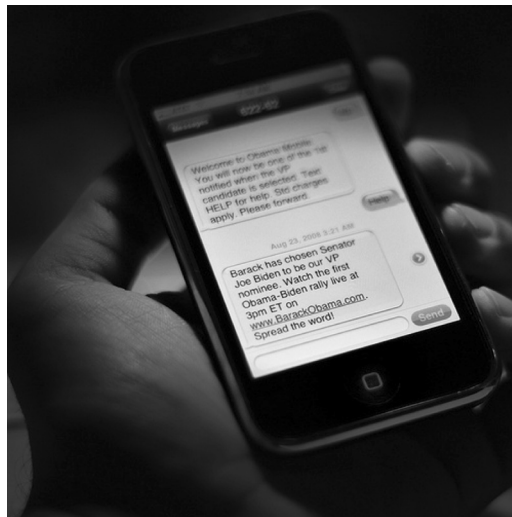


Figure 1. Cell phone message from the Obama campaign announcing Obama's vice presidential nominee (Cazimiro, 2008). The text message states, "Barack has chosen Senator Joe Biden to be our VP nominee. Watch the first Obama-Biden rally live at 3pm ET on www.BarackObama.com. Spread the word!"

keep in touch with followers. Owyang (2008) reports that on Twitter, @barackobama had 112,474 followers by November 2008, while @johnmccain had only 4,603.

Supporter-Generated Content

Perhaps more compelling than the official campaign uses of new media were those generated by supporters outside of the campaign using new media tools. These included websites devoted to Barack Obama and blogs, email essays, songs, and videos about the candidate. Most prominent among the user-generated videos on YouTube were Obama Girl's "I got a crush . . . on Obama," which received more than 12 million views (barelypolitical, 2007) and will.i.am's "Yes we can" music video which received over 14 million views (WeCan08, 2008). News pieces that originally aired on Television (including satires of candidates and campaigns on *Saturday Night Live*) often found extended lives on the Internet as they were passed digitally through social networks. In some cases, such as the case of the unofficial Facebook group Students for Barack Obama which was started in 2006 by a Bowdoin college student, the Obama campaign incorporated these and made them official parts of the campaign (Vargas, 2008). In all, an estimated 8,000 unofficial Obama campaign websites were created by November 2008 (Swanson, 2008).

Implications for Health Communication

The effects of both the official and unofficial campaign communications can be understood through principles of health communication. Most basically, with new media, the Obama campaign was better able to realize the health communication adage that it is best to reach people multiple times, from multiple sources and in multiple settings (McGuire, 1984). For example, because of the Obama campaign's extensive use of new media, more people were reached not only in traditional settings such as while watching television or when they opened their mail, but, additionally, at their computers and on their cell phones (Nielsen Wire, 2008).

Also, with new media, people were more likely to learn about the Obama campaign from people they knew and trusted, who theory informs us are more influential in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Heaney & Israel, 2002). People were reached not only by the usual cadre of news sources and campaign spokespeople, but also to a greater degree by their friends and family members who may have forwarded on a campaign e-mail or posted about the campaign on their social network webpage.

Perhaps more important than extending reach and altering message source, new media may have been influential by creating new modes of campaign engagement. In some cases, friends were not only passing around content created by the Obama campaign or by news sources, they were sharing content that *they themselves* had created in the form of blogs, videos, or e-mails. This dynamic shift—where supporters were now the creators of campaign materials—represents an important increase in the power of self-expression by the public, a power that had been noted to be on the decline with the rise of mass communications (Mills, 1956). This change in power poses a whole series of challenges for public health professionals who want to control message design and dissemination (Lefebvre, 2007). In the case of the Obama campaign, which was run with a simple and consistent message from the top ("Change"), these voter-generated expressions of support appear to have kept largely with the campaign message and themes, while personalizing and expanding upon them (Swanson, 2008).

While strong supporters found new modes of engagement through new media, those who were only marginally politically inclined also found new modes of engagement. Indicators of support became as easy as clicking on a button, such as the forwarding of an e-mail message or the adding of an Obama badge to a Facebook page. With these new tools of engagement, a much wider range of supporters than in previous campaigns could now publicly demonstrate support for a candidate and be called upon for additional support in the future. Furthermore, these small acts of engagement—especially in a social network context—may have had rippling effects throughout a social network (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992). These effects may have been the result of social modeling (i.e., “She’s got an Obama badge; Since I support Obama, I should put up one too”), or social influence (i.e., “She thinks Obama is the best candidate; Since I trust her judgment, I’ll support Obama too”; Heaney & Israel, 2002). In either case, small acts of support by one person may have led to increased support by others in the network. These small acts of support also may have served to solidify support of an individual for Obama, because, as explained by cognitive dissonance theory, internal beliefs about support for Obama would need to shift to become consistent with these acts of support (Festinger, 1957).

All in all, the campaign’s use of new media appears to have extended its reach, enabled people to be reached by more trusted sources and with more tailored content, and increased modes of campaign engagement, both large and small. Whether the new media strategy worked by creating more presence or ubiquity in people’s daily lives, by reaching more people in the campaign, or by engaging people at a deeper level remain questions that are yet to be fully answered. Nonetheless, the Obama campaign set a new standard to which all future communication campaigns will be compared. And while few public health campaigns will have the budget and resources of a presidential election campaign, there are many take-away lessons for public health. Lessons include the following:

- Consider new media—social network sites, uploaded videos, mobile text messages, and blogs—as part of a comprehensive media mix.
- Encourage horizontal (i.e., peer-to-peer and social network) communications of campaign messages as social influence and modeling are important drivers of behavior. Embrace user-generated messages and content, especially in the case where top-down campaign messages are straightforward and translatable by the public.
- Use new media to encourage small acts of engagement. Small acts of engagement are important for relationship building and can lead to larger acts of engagement in the future. Additionally, small acts of engagement can have effects that ripple throughout a social network.
- Use social media to facilitate in-person grassroots activities, not to substitute for them.

With over 75% of adults using the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007) and almost half of U.S. adults having used new media to follow and engage in the past presidential election (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008), use of new media by U.S. adults can be considered widespread. Obama’s team has reacted to their own success in the campaign by embracing new media for the somewhat distinct task of governing. Since the election, they have used new media to make presidential and governmental communications with the public more open and interactive and to foster citizen engagement.

It remains an empirical question as to which media platforms are most persuasive, for which groups of people, and for what kinds of campaign and citizen engagement activities (e.g., promotion, organizing, or volunteering). Furthermore, it remains to be seen to what degree these campaign tactics can be applied to promoting citizen engagement in the postelection period.

John McCain aptly noted in his concession speech to Obama that Obama had won the election “by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president” (McCain-Palin, 2008). It is our view that new media played an important role in that inspiration. Public health communication campaigns might take a lesson from history and do the same.

References

- Abrams, L., Schiavo, R., & Lefebvre, R. C. (2008). New media cases: The promise and potential. *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing, 2*, Retrieved December 9, 2008, from <http://www.casesjournal.org/volume2>
- barelypolitical. (2007, June 13). “I Got a Crush... On Obama” By Obama Girl (video). Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>
- Bikhchandani, S., Hirshleifer, D., & Welch, I. (1992). A theory of fads, fashion, custom, and cultural change as information cascade. *Journal of Political Economy, 100*(5), 992–1026.
- Cazimiro. (2008, August 23). (Photo) <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cazimiro/2789581440/>
- Creamer, R. (2008, May 12). Top 10 reasons Obama defeated Clinton for the Democratic Nomination. *The Huffington Post*, Retrieved December 15, 2008, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-creamer/top-10-reasons-obama-defe_b_101307.html
- Deighton, J., & Kornfeld, L. (2009). Obama versus Clinton: The YouTube Primary. *Harvard Business School Cases*, Retrieved January 15, 2009, from http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b01/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=509032
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gardner, A. (2008, November 1). Plugged in volunteers blaze new campaign trail. *The Washington Post*, B01.
- Hamilton, L., Dennings, K., & Abrams, L. C. (2008). Promoting recycling in North Carolina with new media: The RE3.org campaign. *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing, 2*, Retrieved from <http://www.casesjournal.org/volume2>
- Harnden, T. (2008, June 6). How Barack Obama defeated Hillary Clinton. *The Daily Telegraph*, Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/uselection2008/2076258/How-Barack-Obama-beat-Hillary-Clinton.html>
- Heaney, C. A., & Israel, B. A. (2002). Social networks and social support. In K. Glanz, B. Rimer, & K. Visnawath (Eds.), *Health behavior and health education: Theory, research and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hoff, T., Mishel, M., & Rowe, I. (2008). Using new media to make HIV personal: A partnership of MTV and the Kaiser Family Foundation. *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing, 2*, Retrieved from <http://www.casesjournal.org/volume2>
- Huhman, M. (2008). New media and the VERB[™] campaign: Tools to motivate tweens to be physically active. *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing, 2*, Retrieved <http://www.casesjournal.org/volume2>
- Lefebvre, R. C. (2007). The new technology: The consumer as participant rather than target audience. *Social Marketing Quarterly, 13*, 31–42.
- McCain-Palin 2008. (2008, November 4). Remarks from Senator John McCain. Retrieved December 19, 2008, from <http://www.johnmccain.com/splash110408.htm>
- McGuire, W. J. (1984). Public communication as a strategy for inducing health-promoting behavioral change. *Preventive Medicine, 13*(3), 299–319.

- McSwain, D. (2008, December 2). Join the Discussion: Former Sen. Daschle responds on health care. *Change. gov.*, Retrieved January 15, 2009, from http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/join_the_discussion_daschles_healthcare_response/
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York: Oxford Press.
- Nielsen Wire. (2008, November 25). *How Obama's local buys added up*. Retrieved December 9, 2008, from http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/how-obamas-local-buys-addedup
- Owyang, J. (2008, November 3). Snapshot of presidential candidate social networking stats. *Posted to Web Strategy by Jeremiah*. Retrieved December 9, 2008, from <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2008/11/03/snapshot-of-presidential-candidatesocial-networking-stats-nov-2-2008>
- Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2007). *Pew internet and American life project tracking survey*. Retrieved June 11, 2007, from http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Activities_6.11.07.htm.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2008). *The internet and the 2008 election*. Retrieved February 11, 2009, from http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/252/report_display.asp
- Schatz, A. (2008, August 25). Nielsen: About three million got Obama text. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- Swanson, B. (2008, November 7). Obama ran a capitalist campaign. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved December 9, 2008, from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122602757767707787.html>
- Taubenheim, A., Long, T., Smith, E. C., Jeffers, D., Wayman, J., & Temple, S. (2008). "The heart truth:" Using the power of branding and social marketing to increase awareness of heart disease in women. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 14(3), 3–29.
- Vargas, J. A. (2008, August 20). Obama's wide web. *The Washington Post*, p. C01.
- Vargas, J. A. (2009, March 2). Web-savvy Obama hits unexpected bumps. *The Washington Post*, p. A03.
- WeCan08. (2008, February 2). *Yes We Can—Barack Obama music video*. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>
- Williams, A., Zraik, D., Schiavo, R., & Hatz, D. (2008). Raising awareness of sustainable food issues and building community via the integrated use of new media and other communication approaches. *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing*, 2, Retrieved from <http://www.casesjournal.org/volume2>