

Chapter 23

Rhetoric in the Campaign Website of Barack Obama

Mary Stromme

In the presidential campaign of 1960 John F. Kennedy gained popularity through a series of televised debates with Richard Nixon. Unlike Nixon, Kennedy did not underestimate the power and nuances of communicating via the newest technology of the day, and his inspired insight helped him to win the election:

In 1950, only 11% of American homes had television (all black and white); by 1960, the number had jumped to 88% (a tiny fraction in color). An estimated seventy million Americans, about 2/3 of the electorate, watched the first debate on September 26th. Kennedy had met the day before with the producer to discuss the design of the set and the placing of the cameras. Nixon, just out of the hospital after a painful knee injury, did not take advantage of this opportunity. Kennedy wore a blue suit and shirt to cut down on glare and appeared sharply focused against the gray studio background. Nixon wore a gray suit and seemed to blend into the set. Most importantly, JFK spoke directly to the cameras and the national audience. Nixon, in traditional debating style, appeared to be responding to Kennedy.

Most Americans watching the debates felt that Kennedy had won. (Most radio listeners seemed to give the edge to Nixon.) The candidates had appeared as equals. Almost overnight the issues of experience and maturity seemed to fade from the campaign. Studies would later show that of the 4 million voters who made up their minds as a result of the debates, 3 million voted for Kennedy. Nixon seemed much more poised and relaxed in the three subsequent debates, but it was the first encounter which reshaped the election.¹

Similar to television in the 1960s, internet technology, as it continues to inform and shape mass communication is having a major impact on presidential elections today.

The role of the World Wide Web in a democracy and its impact on American political campaigns has been discussed for several years now, but until recently little attention has been focused on the websites of individual candidates. The rapid rise in popularity of relatively unknown 2008 presidential candidate, Barack Obama, along with

¹ “JFK in History: Campaign of 1960,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/Campaign+of+1960.htm> (accessed 16 June 2009).

the substantial increase in the number of voters attending primaries and caucuses during the 2008 election prompted reporters, political experts, educators, and others to try to figure out how and why. Many have commented on Obama's rhetorical skills, but fewer have written on the rhetorical appeal of his campaign website.

Because Barbara Warnick is one of only a handful in the field of rhetoric who has spent time researching and publishing in the area of rhetoric on the internet, her book, *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web* (2007) serves as a useful guide. Following Warnick, I examine Obama's website as a text, analyzing the use of rhetorical strategies with, as she suggests, a "move more toward reader-centered criticism of texts" (122). I will begin by providing a brief definition of rhetoric and explain the components of field dependency, interactivity, and intertextuality and their significance within an analysis of a website. Since rhetoric's success is dependent not only on its skillful presentation, but also on how it is perceived and interpreted by an audience, it is also necessary to devote some attention to the site's target audience. From there I will move to a closer examination of Obama's website by examining some of its visual, organizational, and interactive components and, for a point of contrast, compare it with John McCain's. The ultimate goal of my analysis is to provide a better understanding of the role rhetoric plays in the electronic environment of a presidential candidate's website, but also to help provide some context and perspective of this website within the larger milieu of the internet.

In *Rhetoric Online* Warnick explains how technology is rapidly changing the way we communicate and she emphasizes the need for more analyses of the persuasive techniques being utilized online (viii). Rhetoric is, as she explains, "the persuasive dimension of all forms of discourse addressed to audiences" and it "functions as ubiquitously on the World Wide Web as it does in other communication environments" (121). While acknowledging that rhetoric can be analyzed as it occurs within different mediums, Warnick also notes that the art of persuasion online contains variables that are different from more traditional forms of rhetoric. For example, it is not possible to analyze the *ethos* of one specific author/speaker when looking at a website that has been created, maintained, and updated by several people (25). Also, the way an audience extracts information from a website is different from the way they read a printed text or listen to a speech: "The consumer of hypertext... chooses his or her own path through the links presented and thus decides on the order in which textual components will be read. The nonsequential reading that results means that online texts generally do not rely on the forms of organization and argument that are characteristic of continuous texts" (Warnick 28). The ability to read and interact with a text in a personalized nonsequential order by clicking on links that pertain to a viewer's interests is very appealing to many website users and is a component that I will return to later.

Because a growing number of people have access to computers and are seeking information online, it is important to understand how different visual and textual components are strategically combined to convey remediating messages for our consumption. It is also important to differentiate between the audience's participation in the larger arena of the internet and those who are interacting with the more specific

location of a particular website. According to the Pew Research Center's June 2008 results in "The Internet and the 2008 Election":

More Americans have gone online to get political news and campaign information so far [as of May 11, 2008] than during all of 2004.

40% of all Americans (internet users and non-users alike) have gotten news and information about this year's campaign via the internet.

19% of Americans go online once a week or more to do something related to the campaign, and 6% go online to engage politically on a daily basis.

23% of Americans say they receive emails urging them to support a candidate or discuss the campaign once a week or more.

While research such as this reveals the increasing importance of the internet on American presidential campaigns, the online audience tracking service, Compete, provides more specific information about the number of people who had been viewing the current presidential candidates' websites. The "data shows that McCain's site had 807,518 unique visitors in June [while] more than 2.5 million unique visitors checked out Obama's site the same month" ("McCain's Web Site Traffic Surges, But Obama Still Leads Online," *Wired*, July 18, 2008, by Sarah Lai Stirland, par. 2). There are a number of reasons why Obama's website was viewed by such a substantial number of people, and part of it may be its rhetorical appeal.

Field Dependency

The criteria for evaluating the *ethos*, or credibility, of a website, is different depending on the audience's perception of the site's purpose and function. In her book, Warnick refers to this as "field dependency" (67), and explains that "[u]sers will not judge the credibility of a medical site in the same way as an entertainment site, an alternative media site, or a travel site. The standards they apply will depend on the characteristics of the field in which the site is located." (67) Focusing on political campaign websites in general, it is helpful to understand user expectations specific to this particular field. According to Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Kristen A. Foot's research in "Citizen Perceptions of Online Interactivity and Implications for Political Campaign Communication" (2002), most people are "wary about being duped or used by campaigns" (par. 48) and "they [want] the Internet to allow them to participate directly in the campaign, yet they [do] not want to be involuntarily pulled into it" (par. 48). Considering this information, it appears that most viewers are aware that the content of a campaign website is likely to be biased and is designed to be persuasive. This may be why the January 2008 results in a Pew Research article reveal that even though more people are accessing the internet for news, only 2% of those who get their campaign information online report visiting candidate websites (7).² Most of the website's users,

² The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off: Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008." 11 Jan. 2008. (accessed 7 Apr. 2008).

then, are not going to a candidate's website for fair and balanced information or updates on the campaign. Research from both Warnick and Stromer-Galley suggest that most users are attracted to a candidate's website because they want to participate or interact with others.

Interactivity and Intertextuality

Stromer-Galley and Foot reveal that although users may be skeptical when entering a candidate's website, they are very interested in being able to participate in some way. They note that "the focus group participants in [their] study talked substantially more about their ability to manipulate content on a website than about their fear of being manipulated by a site producer" (Stromer-Galley and Foot par. 25).³ Having the ability to easily access information in a personalized way via the various links or interact with others by posting messages on a blog are significant features. This corresponds with Warnick's discussion of "the rhetorical dimensions of intertextuality as used on the World Wide Web" and her assertion that "the presence of intertextuality may contribute to a site's appeal as readers participate in the construction of textual meaning" (91). Even though this is an important component of a candidate's website, for first-time viewers the initial impression conveyed by the overall appearance of the site affects their perception of its credibility.

The Importance of Appearance

Those who are interested in finding out more about the candidate and his/her stance on specific issues will likely be influenced first by the site's appearance. In their essay, "Believe It or Not: Factors Influencing Credibility on the Web" (2002), C. Nadine Wathen and Jacquelyn Burkell explain that "surface credibility is evident in the assessment of Internet information. Information coupled with a well-designed interface and attractive graphics may result, in the absence of more substantive cues, in a tendency for users to make a positive credibility judgment" (138). Within the field of campaign websites Obama's and McCain's both contained similar features: prominently displayed links for viewers to "contribute" or "donate" to the campaign, links that led to information on the candidate's background and family, and links that took viewers to content concerning the candidate's thoughts on pertinent issues. The general organization and appearance of Obama's website was, in many ways, typical of others in this field, yet there were noticeable differences as well. Although many viewers may not be aware of the subtle effects of supposedly minor details, the cumulative effect is powerful. Everything from the choice of font design to the mantras of "hope" and "change" were carefully designed to correspond with and support Obama's appeal to a diverse American audience. In a January 2008 *Boston Globe* article, "What font says 'Change'? Kate Sontag and David Graham Type designers decode the presidential candidates," Sam Berlow and Cyrus Highsmith analyzed the font choices of presidential candidates emphasizing the ways in which "the type talks to us, the reader[s]" (Berlow

³ It is important to point out that Stromer-Galley and Foot's research was conducted in 2000. Users' perceptions of online interactivity and the level of control they have while interacting with the content of a website in 2000 may be different from the perceptions of website users in 2008.

and Highsmith par. 1). When describing Obama’s choice of Gotham font, they included adjectives such as “contemporary” and “fresh”, and said that: “This typography is young and cool. Clearly not the old standards of years past” (Berlow and Highsmith par. 4).

Like the choice of typography, there were several persuasive visual elements on Obama’s website that were strategically coordinated to influence viewers. Incorporating specific shades of the color blue, for example, that provided a subliminal yet complementary layer of support for the site’s text and visual images was an aspect that many users were likely not consciously aware of. Also, the website creators’ choice to use a specific shade of sky blue, applying the lightest shades most distinctly in the area immediately surrounding an image of Obama’s head and upper torso, which was positioned strategically next to his plea, “I’m asking you to believe”, had the cumulative effect of making him appear savior-like (See Figure 1). The lightest shades of blue

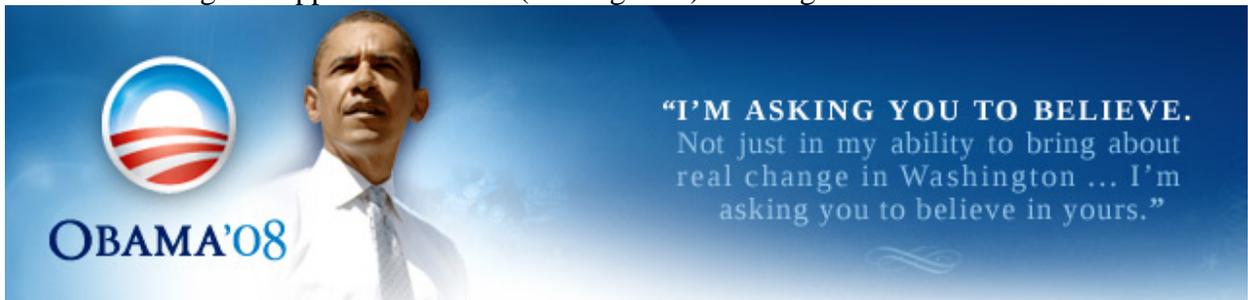


Figure 1

located near the top of the website’s home page evoked a sense of ‘hope’ in a new day. Integrating lighter shades of blue with white, rather than choosing a consistently darker shade of blue or a more liberal use of other colors were also a strategic choice. In *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (2006), Paul Lester explains that “lighter colors tend to be viewed as soft and cheerful, and darker colors have a harsh or moody emotional quality about them” (35). He stresses the importance of colors by explaining how they affect us on emotional and psychological levels:

Because color—more than any other visual attribute—has the capacity to affect the emotions of the viewer, a message may be forever remembered or forever lost, depending on how color is utilized. For that reason, pay particular attention to the use of colors in graphic design. Color easily draws attention to itself. Used the right way, color can emphasize an important part of a message; if used casually or too often, color can be a serious distraction. (Lester 37)

In contrast to Obama’s website, McCain’s (particularly before May 2008) was definitely darker (See Figure 2). Different color schemes, images, and the organization of information on each of



Figure 2 (from April 8, 2008)

these websites were all used to present a specific persona of the candidate but they also contain an implicit vision of an American audience. As noted previously, the colors and organization of Obama's website corresponded with his message of hope (Figure 3) while the darker, more serious tone of McCain's website in April evokes the steadfast loyalty contained in his military history.⁴



Figure 3.

User Interactivity at www.barackobama.com

Appearance and organization may draw viewers in and help to create a credible *ethos*, but the user's ability to interact with site content as well as other users keeps them coming back. Most internet users expect and are familiar with the personalized

⁴ McCain's website changed significantly in May 2008. Some of these changes are discussed further within this article.

interaction they experience by clicking on the links within websites. There are numerous paths a viewer may take, depending on his or her interests. As noted earlier, the websites of Obama and McCain had many of the same links. One option that was unique to Obama's website, however, was the "People" link.⁵ When viewers clicked on this link they were presented with a lengthy list. At first glance the list appeared to be a curious group of categories—a mixture of ethnicities, sexual orientation, gender, interests, and affiliations—which may have appeared strange on the website of a candidate who proclaimed the importance of unity in America.⁶ Considering this list from a rhetorical perspective, the creators of Obama's website capitalized on the highly personalized reading atmosphere that occurs through the nonsequential reading on websites. The flexible structure of a website provides a unique opportunity for rhetorical appeals that are personalized to viewers already familiar with the process of seeking only information that interests them. Obama clearly could not base his stance of national unity on the previous fiction of a "typical" American, although to some the inclusion of a list such as this may have appeared as if he was encouraging identities of separateness or the continuation of entrenched divisiveness over certain issues. To many who have felt marginalized in America, though, it may have been validating, in a way, to see their identifying group, affiliation, or interest available as a link. For example, Native Americans, or "First Americans" as the website creators referred to them, are rarely addressed directly and publicly in a presidential campaign. They may have interpreted this as an acknowledgement of their concerns in a visible way. Some may have perceived that they, as individuals, were taken seriously by a presidential candidate and that he was aware of their unique problems.

Another option that, until mid-May 2008, was not available on McCain's website was the ability to view the text in either English or Spanish. This small link was located in the upper right-hand corner of every page and carried with it an implicit indication of the level of the candidates' concern for and interest in communicating with Spanish-speaking constituents.⁷ I am not sure if the initial absence of this feature was an unintentional oversight by the creators of McCain's website, but they obviously decided it was important enough to add later.

Blogging: Interactivity with others at www.barackobama.com and beyond

There are many subtle factors that influence the credibility and appeal of a website. The ability to participate along with other users in creating a portion of the

⁵ After April 2008 McCain added a similar "Coalitions" link.

⁶ I am referring to Obama's call for unity during his widely praised keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in which he proclaimed that we are not "red states" or "blue states" but the "United States" and also, in his call for a more united national identity he asserted that "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" (Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama's 2004 Speech at the Democratic National Convention. *Washington Post*).

⁷ On Obama's section dedicated to "Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders", the option of viewing the information in Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese was also available for viewers. This type of attention to detail by the site's creators is part of what may have made his website appealing to diverse groups of people. It portrayed an aware and concerned ethos for people from a variety of backgrounds and locations.

website is perhaps one of the most appealing features of a campaign website. Viewers who are actively writing on blogs, whether to present their own opinion, share a piece of news, or react to the writings of others, are participating in the co-creation of a part of the candidate's website. My intermittent visits to the blog on Obama's website between February and May 2008, as well as less frequent visits to Clinton's and McCain's blogs for comparison, reveal that the majority of bloggers on campaign websites are loyal supporters of their candidate.⁸ The blog is a location where users can and do voice their support of one another, share their anger over the most recent media stories, add links to encouraging articles or other fundraising sites, and report on the progress of fundraising efforts. In her book Warnick refers to this process as "fanout" (88) and it is a process that Obama's campaign staff and loyal supporters advanced to heightened levels.

Conclusion

Considering the amount of money Obama was able to raise⁹ and the interest he helped to generate among younger voters,¹⁰ my research indicates that a candidate's website can be a central force in the successful election of a candidate to office. According to a March 2008 article in *Wired*, "Most prominent in Obama's suite of sites is the social networking tool my.BarackObama.com. Since its launch a little more than a year ago, more than 500,000 accounts have been created and 30,000 supporter-created campaign events listed at the site" (Stirland par. 10). As this article suggests, the ripple

⁸ My visits to campaign blogs coincide with the results of Warnick's research on the interactive components in George Bush's 2004 campaign website. She suggests that "By involving users in posting and reading user-contributed content, campaign sites can promote user/candidate identification and thus intensify loyalty to the campaign" (Warnick 89).

⁹ The April 4, 2008 *New York Times* article, "For Obama, a 2-to-1 Edge Over Clinton in Donations" by Leslie Wayne reveals that "[t]he \$40 million raised in March brings Mr. Obama's total [received from donations] to \$237 million, compared with \$193 million for Mrs. Clinton" (par. 6), and Ken Dilanian's article, "Obama's Claim of Independence Questioned" in the April 15, 2008 issue of *USA Today* which states that Obama's "raising of \$193 million and counting [is] the most of any presidential campaign" (par. 7).

¹⁰ According to Jan Hoffman's April 28, 2008 article, "Young Obama Backers Twist Parents' Arms," in *The New York Times* "the young supporters of Mr. Obama, who has captured a majority of under-30 primary voters, seem to be leading in the pestering sweepstakes. They send their parents the latest Obama YouTube videos, blog exhortations and 'Tell Your Mama/Vote for Obama!' bumper stickers" (par. 3). Also, after the February 5, 2008 primaries and caucuses held in more than 20 states, Rock the Vote blog reported that "[a]ccording to CNN's exit polls and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), in nearly ever state holding a primary of caucus last night, youth voter turnout increased significantly—doubling, tripling and even quadrupling turnout from 2000 and 2004" (par. 3).

effect created by a relatively small number of people who are inspired and motivated is difficult to ascertain.

Obama's campaign demonstrated the ways in which a candidate's website can quickly turn into a "suite of sites" that can exponentially increase the momentum, popularity, and support of a candidate. Obama's campaign website appears to have been an integral meeting center and touchstone for many of his supporters. Whether they arrived to organize offline activities, to connect with others, or to exchange ideas and links, the activity on this website had an impact on far more people than just those who accessed the site.

Because an electronic environment such as the internet has the capacity to reach and influence such a large number of people, more attention needs to be focused on the rhetoric contained within a candidate's website. Although it is admittedly only one aspect of a campaign, the rhetorical strategies on a candidate's website present and reflect a candidate, as well as persuade or dissuade others. Like the rhetorical strategies Kennedy had the insight to see as working uniquely well within the medium of television, Obama recognized the potential of success through rhetorical appeals that worked particularly well within a digital environment. Rhetoric within campaign websites needs to be considered and evaluated as the integral part of contemporary political campaigns that it most certainly is.

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