Barack Obama's use of the Internet is transforming political communication

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Abstract

The article describes the innovations introduced by Barak Obama's campaign in how to use the Internet as a tool to communicate with electors, in fundraising and in mobilising his supporters. It also describes how the new President is using the web as a government tool.

The text also details the subsequent appearances of Obama websites on the Internet, the creation of his own social net, the candidate's presence on other social nets and his massive use of YouTube.

Finally, an initial overview of the situation leads us to think that Barak Obama's use of the Internet will lead, in the immediate future, to a far-reaching transformation of politic communication.

Key words

Communication, politics, electoral, Internet, strategy, mobilisation, fundraising, YouTube, Obama, Government

Resum

L'article centra el seu objecte en les innovacions introduïdes per la campanya de Barack Obama en la utilització d'Internet per comunicar-se amb els electors, aconseguir recursos econòmics i mobilitzar els seus seguidors. També descriu com el nou president està utilitzant la xarxa com a instrument de govern.

El text, a més, es refereix a l'aparició seqüencial de les pàgines web d'Obama a Internet, la creació de la seva pròpia xarxa social, la presència del candidat en altres xarxes socials i la utilització intensiva que van fer de YouTube.

Finalment, l'elaboració d'un primer balanç fa pensar que l'ús que està fent Obama d'Internet comportarà en l'immediat futur una transformació important de la comunicació política.

Paraules clau

Comunicació, política, electoral, Internet, estratègia, mobilització, captació de fons, YouTube, Obama, govern.

The presidential elections of 4 November 2008, with the victory of Barack Obama, broke quite a few paradigms that many political experts considered to be immovable with regard to North American politics: the presidency was won by a black politician, the participation rate was more than 55% of the electorate, television was not the hegemonic medium in the campaign and the winner achieved victory without big lobbies, corporations or other economic centres funding the campaign.

If we ask ourselves what gave Obama his victory, the answer is necessarily complex as there are many highly contradictory factors that determine electoral results. To produce a good analysis of the causes determining victory we must talk of the candidate's personality, the political situation to begin with, funding, the adversaries, the message conveyed to voters by the winning campaign, the kind of discourse employed and the media used to communicate and to mobilise voters in favour of the candidature in question. In the case of Barack Obama's campaign, all these elements have been decisive but there is one, the use made of the Internet to communicate and mobilise the electorate, that stands out due to the new methods used and the central role given to it. When we analysed the North American presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, it was frequent to wonder about the role held by the Internet

in the campaign overall and whether its influence had surpassed that of television. The answer in both cases was no. We had to wait until the 2008 elections for Internet to exceed the huge impact also exacted by television. But not only this: it is also highly likely that the way in which Obama's campaign used the Internet has forever transformed how election campaigns are run and has significantly changed all communication in the political sphere.

A great cause, a great candidate and a grassroots campaign

Obama's Internet campaign achieved interaction with 10 million voters. Of these, 3 million made financial donations, totalling 750 million dollars, and 1,200,000 people became involved, taking part in the mobilisation on the ground. These figures are between 5 and 10 times higher than any other previous campaign.

In an article published on the website of the think tank Terra Nova,[1] its director Olivier Ferrand refers to the keys to this great mobilisation, in which the core instrument and main stage was the Internet, in the following way:

1. Obama managed to awaken a great cause: change.

2. The campaign was charismatic, focused on himself until the even the leader was totally identified with the cause of change.

3. It raised the style of local campaigns to a state level, where the core of the communication with voters is door to door.

4. It gave power to party activists. They were the ones who went from door to door, asking for money and organising events.

5. It was a horizontal campaign. The 2,700 paid campaign staff were not issuers of a communication that only went from top to bottom but their task was to coordinate voluntary members and their initiatives.

6. The work of activists was to organise *a la carte* according to the profile and desire to work of each person signing up.

The Dean campaign, the best precedent

The Internet has been used since before 2000 for political and electoral communication. In his article entitled *Irrupción de Internet en el panorama electoral*[2] David Domingo remembers that, in 1996, Robert Dole during the presidential campaign when he took on Bill Clinton gave the address of his website for the first time and invited the audience to visit it. After an hour the server hosting the website went offline, overrun by thousands of users who wanted to access it from their computers. But the most significant precedent for Obama's campaign on the Internet occurred in 2004 and starred Howard Dean, who stood in the primaries against John Kerry with great initial success which afterwards was not consolidated. At that time there were no social networks as we know them today: there was no YouTube, MySpace had been born less than a year before and Facebook wouldn't be created until 2005. But with the help of MoveOn.org, a progressive North American association, Dean managed to raise almost 41 million dollars for his campaign via the Internet, a figure that was a surprising record for the time. His virtual followers, for the first time, started to talk to each other and to gather funds via Meet up and Deans space, forerunners of what are now social networks. "What we did", says Howard Dean, "is put those helping us in touch with each other. Our idea was to accompany the change from the base to the surface. Barack Obama used the new platforms and was more disciplined than I was. For the first time, young people of 35 voted more than those aged 65. The Internet does not guarantee someone will be elected; you always have to listen to the community and develop a campaign on the ground. The door to door with 4 visits to the same person is essential."[3]

Apart from the campaign of the former governor of Vermont, Howard Dean, we can find other precedents and examples that are quite interesting over the last 7 years for using the Internet in elections, such as the well-known campaign by Ségolène Royal "Desirs d'Avenir", the "Money Bomb" organised by the candidate for the Republican primaries Ron Paul, who raised 6 million dollars in just one day, 4 of them from the Internet, and

Mike Huckabee's campaign in the primaries against John McCain who, in spite of his brief appearance, managed to mobilise 12,000 volunteers.[4]

To systematically analyse Obama's campaign on the Internet, we will refer to three quite different aspects. Firstly, we will analyse the use made of the Internet as an instrument of information; the scaling of the different pages that those in charge of the campaign have gradually incorporated and the role given to YouTube. We will then talk about the Internet as an instrument of mobilisation and, in this field, specifically, as a means of fundraising. Finally, we will also refer to the use the new president is making of the Internet as an instrument of governance. All these aspects are significant in Obama's administration, not only because of their innovations but also for the dimensions each of these phenomena have achieved.

Sequential scaling of websites

The purpose of informing was the first given to the Internet by election campaigns. With regard to transmitting information, of note is the degree of clarity with which both the design and content were produced, the latter constantly updated. We should also add the mass use of audiovisuals, both on YouTube and on the Internet per se and other social networks.

A novelty almost without precedent was the sequential use of the different websites which have been changing even name and location during the journey taken by Obama from the primaries to his current presidential position. The sequential appearance of his own pages has been accompanied by other parallel sites promoted by the campaign itself or by related groups that appeared as instruments to impact public opinion, dealing with partial aspects.

The personal website of Obama as candidate is barackobama.com.[5] We have already mentioned that it had a clear design that made it easy to surf and contained information considered to be the most important for the campaign. The appointment of Joe Biden as the vice-presidential candidate was first announced to fans connected to the website and only afterwards was communicated to the press. All the candidate's gadgets and merchandising were sold from barackobama.com. But the website also had the mission to be a kind of virtual operations centre from where people visiting the site could go to other related pages. The most important of these during the campaign was My.BarackObama.com, which functioned as a veritable tailor-made social network where users could sign up and act as volunteers for the campaign via the ways we will describe in the section on mobilisation.

My.BarackObama.com also contained Obama's personal blog and was linked to different social networks, especially Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, but also more specific networks such as Migente.com, where the space "Latinos for Obama"[6] and "Join the wave" could be found. Quite a few parallel sites related to the main site arose. The most visited were fightthes-

mears.com to combat and clarify smears and inaccuracies expressed about the candidate and healthplanfacts.org with details on the future health policy. The campaign also registered MeetBarackObama as a parody site to cover up MeetBarack which had been set up by adversaries in order to discredit him. In the last few months of the campaign, "vote for change" and "join the wave" appeared to encourage voters to take part, both by signing up on the electoral register and going to the polls on election day. "Vote for change" also promoted and gave its name to a concert tour in the last few weeks before the election, which shared objectives with the website and held shows in the "swing states", those states considered to be undecided and that historically vary their vote according to the candidates. This initiative had been carried out for the first time four years before for the Democrat candidate John Kerry. For this reason the initiative by Obama was called "vote for change 08"

Within the context of this sequential strategy between electoral victory and taking over government, Obama's campaign opened a transition website, change.org that, apart from the candidate's blog, also contained comments and information on day to day matters. Users were encouraged to share and propose ideas for government. Obama's meetings with entities and collaborators were shown live and job offers were also received from followers. Change.org was also used to carry out a survey on what the new government should do, among the ten million people that had given their mobile number or email. The person responsible for change.org was Macon Phillips, currently the White House Director of New Media. One of the most widely commented aspects of the transition was the speed with which Phillips and his team changed and gave new life to the White House website. As the inauguration speech had only just started, Phillips and his team got up from the stage and went to their offices. At 12 noon, the new site WhiteHouse.gov came online, replacing the site for George W. Bush. As the online newspaper Clarksville explained the next day "It's an impressive site, building on and expanding the technology and communication systems that tech-savvy Obama used in his presidential campaign". After the first click the section "Change has come to America" appears. The first three pages are "Revitalizing the economy", "Welcome to the new Whitehouse" and "A new era of Public Service".

Clarksville online also points out that the new site will show a video every week of President Obama speaking to the nation. The page also includes a blog by the Director of New Media, the government's statements and decisions and the possibility to send emails to the president and his government, with a limit of 500 words.[7] Over the next few days, experts commented quite extensively on the fact that the site had eliminated the copyright held by Bush on his official White House site.

In addition to the official website for the Presidency, Obama has also kept up his social network at full tilt. My.BarackObama.com has been extended to *Organizing for America*, organising also meaning "putting in order". Apart from the pages that already formed part of the My.BarackObama.com site, this new site also transmits the President's acts live, announces his future agenda and continues to accept financial donations. It should be noted, however that *Organizing for America* has been created and is developed related to the Democrat Party to avoid accusations of being personality-focused.[8]

Images on YouTube

The emergence of YouTube has been one of the great novelties of the last campaign. Created in February 2005, this website, owned by Google, has been a permanent setting for the campaign and, as such, has had wonderful moments. The first occurred mid-2007 when Amber Lee, a singer and model and not very well-known at the time, uploaded on the site *I have a crush on Obama...* a song in favour of Chicago's candidate which, in July 2007, had received 2.5 million visitors.[9] Of the 22 debates held between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the most novel was the one that took place on 24 July 2007, broadcast by CNN with questions posted by different voters on YouTube. John Edwards also took part as well as five other primary candidates. The pre-candidates answered 20 questions in front of the cameras, chosen from the 2,300 questions in video format send by users to YouTube. Apart from this debate with its innovative format, the video recorded by Vill.I.Am, *Yes You Can* with well-known singer/songwriters and actors repeating phrases that had just been spoken by Obama, also played a leading role in the campaign. In February 2008, it had already had 4 million visits on YouTube, totalling 14 million by election day and 80,000 comments. The other culminating moment was the speech *A More Perfect Union* given by Obama on 18 March 2008 in response to the accusation of having collaborated with the radical preacher Jeremiah Wright, which was classified as the most important act, by far, of the campaign. Uploaded immediately onto YouTube, it was seen by 1.3 million people on the first day, totalling 3.4 million after 10 days.[10]

Apart from these facts, which the conventional press covered quite extensively due to their novelty, Obama's campaign also made a mass and innovative use of images on the Internet. The *Obama TV Chanel* was created within YouTube. In August 2008, 1,100 videos had been uploaded onto this space, totalling 2,000 hours of images. These included mainly recordings of live events, mini documentaries and campaign advertisements. The day before the election, 488,093 hours of McCain's videos had been seen, compared with 14,548,809 hours for Obama's.[11]

Unprecedented mobilisation

On 4 November 2008, Obama managed to get 2 out of 3 young people to vote for him, as well as 2 out of 3 Hispanics, 9 out of 10 African Americans and 56% of the women who

went to the polls, with an overall participation of 60%, ten points higher than the usual rate. This mobilisation in his favour was achieved by Obama with an innovative focus that used the Internet not only as a source of information but also to promote a very powerful social network where messages circulated from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top but especially horizontally between the followers themselves. As stated by the Director of the online campaign, Rahaf Harfoush, "they were capable of using online communication for offline mobilisation". Moreover, horizontal communication established between the followers themselves and also between these and other targets constituted the largest viral marketing campaign ever recorded in the political sphere.

Kurt Cagle, Editor of O'Reilly Media,[12] has also written about mobilisation. "One week in Missouri was particular telling. McCain attended three rallies in front of collectively around 12,000 people. During that same week, Obama appeared before more than 150,000 people in four rallies, each of these coordinated via cell phones or text messages, email or syndicated feed".

Barack Obama made the dream of Howard Dean come true: to recruit and organise sympathisers en masse thanks to the Internet to send them, in a coordinated manner and with military strategy, out into the field. As pointed out in an article by the think tank Terra Nova[13] "It's the first campaign in the 21st century where the Internet has been fused with the field and door to door techniques of local campaigns have been incrusted within a general campaign". To achieve this, Obama's campaign generated a comprehensive database from those who had signed up voluntarily either on Facebook or directly on Obama's website. By using this database, prepared and analysed systematically by the company *Spotlight Analysis*, it could be detected which volunteers were really taking part, how much they were involved and their activity, what they did, where they lived and other information used to personalise the emails and include them on the map and the door to door itineraries, as well as on the indicators for fundraising and text message or telephone call lists used to send alerts, reminders on election day, the findings of polls, data on events being held close to where they were located, etc.

When they used to enter My.BarackObama.com and now on entering *Organizing for America*, people could get to know the following instruments for participation:

a. **How to write a blog.** Within My.BarackObama, you are encouraged to write your personal experiences and your opinion on issues related to the campaign or the government's actions

b. **Create your own profile** answering how you want to form part of the network, how you want to help others, what information you want to receive, how you want to be identified and why you support Obama.

c. **Contact voters.** Volunteers are asked to call or visit voters in their neighbourhood to ask them to support Obama. This can be done by joining a calling or a walking group. Volunteers

receive lists of voters close to where they live. They also receive a map of how to get there and a conversation guide. Finally they are asked to send a report with the results.

d. **Join a group.** The site says that there are 20,000 active groups. These are divided into different categories: living on the edge, single men or women, dancers, air traffic controllers, etc. You are sent the activities of these groups when they are close to you, and you are also informed about their characteristics in case you are interested in getting to know the group's members.

e. **Fundraising.** Money can be sent but you can also raise funds on behalf of Obama. You are asked to set a target, "for example, 1,000 dollars" and you are told that it might seem a lot but "you'll be surprised how easy it is if you go to friends and relatives asking for donations". In your space they draw a kind of thermometer that goes up as your funds increase.

Obama also kept his profile on 15 online communities, including BlackPlanet (a MySpace for Afro-Americans) and Eons (a Facebook for baby boomers). On Facebook alone, 3.2 million participants said they supported Obama. On My.BarackObama.com, his own social network, 2.2 million profiles were created and 25,000 groups were ultimately set up. The events organised during the campaign totalled 200,000, 50,000 of these in the last three weeks. They had face to face contact with 13.3 million voters, any of them floating voters, by means of 20,000 group leaders from the different neighbourhoods in the country's cities. As Obama himself stated once the campaign was over: "Among the fundamental beliefs I hold thanks to my days in community work is that real change comes from the bottom, and there's no other instrument like the Internet to organise people."[14]

Fundraising via the Internet

Phil Tajitsu Nash, CEO of the fundraising agency *Campaign Advantage*, is right to state in the online magazine America.gov that a good fundraising campaign requires not only the right technology and not only the right candidate but also a message that resonates with online audiences.[15] Barack Obama achieved all three and this led him to break all fundraising records for electoral campaigns. By 4 November 2008, the future president had received 750 million dollars while John McCain, although his programme defended the interests of the big lobbies and corporations, only received 350 million. Internet was the great instrument used by Obama in his fundraising strategy. The aforementioned Rahaf Harfoush, Director of Barack Obama's online campaign, confirmed in La Vanguardia that 67% of the funds raised for Obama were via the Internet.[16]

North American legislation on electoral campaigns establishes that once a candidate has been appointed, he or she can receive 85 million dollars from the state providing no more

money is requested from private individuals. Obama renounced this state support, leading to strong criticism from his rivals, some interest groups and sections of his own party. The Democrat candidate, the first not to use the public subsidy, defended himself by stating, and rightly so, that this financing system was broken because many of his opponents had been able to get around the restrictions. At the end of the primaries, Obama had raised 266 million dollars from one million and a half donors.

We have mentioned before how his volunteers were mobilised. Let's have a look at the structure of the donations. First, we can state that, of the overall figure raised, 70% came from donations of less than 50 dollars and that 90% of the donations were under 200 dollars. Btu a later study by the *Campaign Finance Institute* published recently, shows that Obama's small donors, i.e. those making donations of less than 1,000 dollars, were not so numerous.[17]

The long duration of the electoral battle against Hillary Clinton and his refusal to use public financing for the general elections gave Obama good motivation to use the Internet to reach those who had already contributed to his campaign to see if they would donate again. It is precisely these repeat donors who, as they exceed 1,000 dollars, altered the previous analyses of Obama's funding. Nevertheless, the number of small donors was abnormally high. 49% gave 200 dollars or less. Obama, however, received 50% more money from large donors (more than $1,000) than from small donors. But even taking this into account, the percentage of money raised from large donors was less than McCain or other campaigns for which we have data: Obama 47%, Kerry 57%, Bush and McCain 60%. On discovering these data, Michael J. Malbin, Director of the *Campaign Finance Institute* said "the reality does not match the myth, but the reality itself was impressive".[18] The Institute considers plausible the figure of 3 million donors given by the official sources of Obama's campaign.

Governing with the Internet

Regarding how the new President Obama is using the Internet, we should point out one aspect that is just starting to be written about. Until 2008, all election campaigns that had used the Internet gradually wound up their site after election day, more or less quickly. But in seeing the use Obama had made of the Internet during the campaign, many thought that the strength of his social network could be used as an instrument to help governance. And this has been the case. To date, what we have seen is the president's interest in keeping his volunteers via *Organizing for America*, the website shared with the Democratic Party but also directly using the official government sites and other electronic media.

Although some have explained it thus, the first action of Obama's government was not to decree that Guantánamo should be shut down but the open application of the *Freedom of Information Act*, the law that allows citizens to access public information. This took the form of a proclamation in favour of the principles of open government via which the White House renounced the copyright on official information and placed spaces on its official websites to receive initiatives and offers of collaboration from citizens.

In the area of information, the government's new attitude became apparent, apart from the president's weekly speech on the Internet, in two speeches posted on YouTube, on 15 November 2008 and 22 April 2009. But the latest issue in this area was the first online speech given by Obama on 1 April this year to the whole nation. The questions came from citizens and they also were responsible for selecting the most important ones. According to data from Ciberpaís, Google *Moderator* was used, available for anyone. 92,936 citizens joined the open conference, sending 104,031 questions classified by order of interest based on 3,604,666 citizen votes. The Spanish newspaper El País echoed Obama's very words when referring to the significance of the event: "What we are doing is an important step towards creating greater communication within this administration". The newspaper adds "In the Internet era, traditional press conferences are just another element when sending out a message and the president knows that. With yesterday's virtual conference, the White House targeted a different audience to the one that reads newspapers or watches TV news, a younger audience, the audience that constructed the innovative campaign that took him to power".[19]

Another unprecedented aspect in using the Internet to govern has been the mobilisation of his volunteers to get measures and bills approved for which Obama has had resistance in the Congress and Senate. The press reported on a mass door to door of Obama supporting Internet users to explain the new direction the president wants to take with the state budgets. Mitch Stewart, director of the website *Organizing for America*, has said that, on 26 March, the following message was sent to Obama followers on the Internet who were Spanish-speakers: "Members of Congress will begin debating President Obama's budget this week, with a vote likely set for next week. What you do now will decide what kind of debate they have: one that's dominated by special interests and partisan voices intent on keeping the status quo, or one that reflects the priorities of citizens like you. Call your elected representatives now to let them know where you stand".[20] Giving his opinion about this new communication strategy, Joe Trippi, former Director of the Howard Dean campaign said, on the *Radio Caracol* website last 20 April: "The twenty-five members of Congress who oppose Obama's plan to reform Public Health, for example, might suddenly find they are facing 25 or 30 million Americans. They're going to destroy them".[21]

Initial conclusions

As can be seen, the novelties provided by Obama's campaign with respect to the Internet have been both quantitative and qualitative. A study by Aaron Smith, specialist from the *Pew Institute*, shows how growth in all parameters by means of which we can value the campaign were exponential: 74% of Internet users in the United States visited Obama's websites to get information or take part in the election. This was also done by 54% of the adult population. It's the first time that more than half the population of voting age has accessed the Internet to follow the electoral process. In fact, all records were broken: 18% of Internet users posted some message on the various forums or debates or on the social network, 45% saw some campaign video online and 1 out of every 3 Internet users sent emails with political content to others. 83% of Internet users between 18 and 24 years of age had their profile on the social network. Two thirds took part in some political activity within the different virtual sites created by the campaign.[22]

If these data are impressive, the qualitative changes reflecting how political communication is carried out are also highly significant. After Obama, whoever doesn't put Internet in pride of place in relations between politicians and citizens will be acting archaically.

In Spain, many of the most recent novelties, including on the websites of parliamentary parties, can only be explained after Obama's campaign. But the changes are spreading throughout the planet. The North American right has been inspired by Obama's use of the Internet to attack him and put their spanner in the works, as well as Russian President Dimitri Medvedev who, on 23 April, sprang into action and opened up a forum on the most popular blog website in his country. My own point of view is that, after Obama's campaign, political communication will never be the same again. But perhaps in a world as dynamic as the Internet, the most surprising thing is still to come. As notes the author of *Internet Politics*, Andrew Chadwick, the Internet is a completely contradictory medium and a large proportion of problems result from the speed of change, not only in the technology itself but perhaps more significantly in how people will accept using technologies in the political sphere. This tends to create an environment where each Internet technology appears to be dormant - perhaps for several years - before it is seized upon, developed and thrust into the political mainstream."[23]

Barack Obama's use of the Internet has been a veritable catalyst, opening up new ways and kinds of work that will surely provide us with more surprises regarding the Internet's latent potential in the near future.

Notes

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