

Brand Management and Relationship Marketing in online environments

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Introduction

The Obama 2008 campaign saw the Internet placed centre stage in election campaigning; it was argued to be a game changer. Developing his techniques as a community organizer, his website provided numerous means for supporters to contribute to the campaign and become closer to the brand, part of a loose milieu around the campaign. Obama's online campaign moved away from the purely transactional approach to campaigning, creating a desire for the product and encouraging the investment of hope (Dermody & Scullion, 2001), to a more relational approach designed to involve supporters and build long term loyalty (Jackson et al, 2012). The unique qualities of the Obama brand in 2008 facilitated building awareness, interest and enthusiasm around the campaign. However, the pressures of incumbency and disorganisation at the centre of the Democrat Party organisation made victory in 2012 less than certain (Bai 2007). It was therefore necessary to re-engage with the online community, in particular the decentralised grassroots progressive movement. Only a relationship marketing approach would be able to connect together these groups and convert them into activists that could be harnessed to the campaign. This chapter analyses this process, exploring the value of a relationship marketing strategy during election campaigns within candidate-centred systems.

Obama built upon innovations in attracting supporters, raising donations and developing a campaign community introduced by Howard Dean in 2004, and embedded within Democrat party thinking while Dean was chairman of the Democrat National Committee 2005-9. While

Dean in 2004 and Obama in 2008 ran outsider campaigns, Obama demonstrated that the Internet offered huge benefits in terms of generating campaign resources that could catapult an outsider to victory. The Obama campaign social network became a resource generation tool as well as an interactive forum for public political discussion. The creation of Obama as an interactive brand through the website MyBO (www.mybarackobama.com) linked well with his outsider status and change message and proved a highly successful tactic (Jackson et al. 2012).

There has been much comment on Obama's strategy and tactics being replicated globally (Lilleker and Jackson 2011). However, it remains to be seen whether the use of interactive platforms are moving election campaigning towards a new paradigm. Our focus is on what those with casual interest in the Obama would see: the brand image, the message, the participatory opportunities and the levels of participation taking place, rather than the hidden tools used by campaigners such as data analytics and cookies. We explore whether the Obama 2008 campaign was a one-off; test the extent to which his innovations were evidenced in 2012 and whether his relationship marketing approach was in any way adopted by his Republican opponent in order to detect whether there is a more relational paradigm of political marketing emerging.

Review of Previous Literature:

Applying the relationship marketing paradigm to online political marketing

Theoretically there are two overarching marketing paradigms or philosophies: transactional and relationship. Transactional marketing focuses on the immediate sale utilising the traditional 4Ps (product, price, promotion and placement) approach (McCarthy 1960), it involves one-way, persuasive communication from brand to consumer using mass media

channels (O'Malley et al. 1999). The only purpose of interaction with the customer is to gain an immediate sale, thus the transactional marketer needs to attract new customers.

Transactional marketing seeks to persuade in order to make a sale. Transactional marketing offered the traditional view of how politics could be explained from a marketing perspective (Mauser 1983; Lees-Marshment 2001; Wring 2001). The message focuses on the political product, such as policies, leaders and activities. Moreover, as Johanson (2005) notes, this approach inherently encourages central control of political campaigns. If transactional marketing is present in candidates' campaigns, we would expect primarily top-down, one-way information provision online.

With relationship marketing, the focus is on building longer term relationships. It is argued that many of the major brands are moving towards the relationship marketing paradigm, developing conversations with their consumers and involving them in the product and service development processes (Duncan and Moriarty 1997). Interactive tools compliment persuasive communication to both encourage longer-term customer loyalty as well as creating awareness and making the sale (Zineldin & Philipson 2007). The relational paradigm has been advocated by many academics over the last three decades as the solution for brands competing for consumers in a crowded marketplace and fragmented media environment (Gronroos 1994). Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested long-term profitability can result from a move from sales exchanges to relational exchanges, so that the value of a customer's lifelong association with a brand increases. A key means of achieving this added value is suggested by Reichheld and Sasser's (1990) whose research stressed retention, rather than the transactional marketing focus on recruitment. The association of relationship marketing with the 7Ps (adding in people, process and physical environment) of marketing (Booms and Bitner 1982), and the emphasis on people and their experiences, inherently encourages

interactivity between the sender and receiver of a message. This interactivity chimes well with placing the consumer at the heart of the brand, or indeed the supporter at the heart of a political organisation (Johansen 2012).

The process of relationship marketing involves moving consumers closer to the organisation. A useful metaphor here is the concept of the loyalty ladder developed first in 1991 and since updated (Christopher et al. 2002). Contacts come in at one level, and then the organisation tries to use a relationship marketing strategy over a period of time to move them up the rungs of the ladder. A mixed communication model, involving both persuasive and relational tools, is used to convert prospects, individuals who are identified by demographic and attitudinal characteristics, into consumers or supporters. At the bottom end of the ladder, consumers' interaction with the organisation are based on a view of what it is in it for them, but at the top rungs consumers become champions who promote the organisation to others. While it is recognised that not every prospect will eventually be converted into a partner, the intention of a relationship marketing strategy is to get prospects onto the ladder and then to move up to the optimum level that satisfies the needs of the brand and the consumer.

Though Henneberg (2002) suggests that politicians would not conceptualise what they do in transactional terms, most research has suggested that transactional marketing applies to the political sphere. Yet Dean and Croft (2001) argue that the transactional approach is unsuitable because parties do not concentrate on the sale of a vote at each election. They suggest that relationship marketing provides mutual benefits, the political product can be tailored to meet citizens' wants and needs, interested citizens can find out whether they like political parties, personalities and policies and the party can educate the electorate. Equally, from a branding perspective, if the political organisation can build relationships with

prospective supporters, and convert them into activists there are two potential new routes to increasing partisan attachments; a direct route through interaction with the organisation as well as an indirect route with activists recruiting further supporters through their social networks, which in theory can be either face-to-face (Jackson & Lilleker 2007) or purely in digital environments (Norris & Curtice 2008).

There is evidence that relationship marketing has been applied to politics (Bannon 2005), Bannon assumes that politics and vote winning during elections is akin to services marketing, and that personal relationships are an asset for parties (Johansen 2012). This idea of the benefits of relationship management is further developed by Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2010) when they suggest that it applies at both a micro level for parties and candidates, and a macro level for the wider political system. They suggest relationship marketing can help parties and candidates win seats, but also to potentially encourage re-enfranchisement with the body politic. We argue that interactive tools offered by digital technologies can connect potential supporters to a political organisation. Political campaigns may secure loyalty and trust by engaging citizen-voters in conversation over a period of time, with digital technologies facilitating access to a broader range of individuals than traditional communication mechanisms.

No research has yet applied the transactional or relationship approaches to US Presidential elections, although there is some evidence that political actors elsewhere have applied a relationship approach online. Looking at how parties used their website, Bowers-Brown (2003) identified the emergence of a relationship marketing paradigm. Jackson (2005; and 2006a) found that parties used email and e-newsletters as part of a relationship marketing approach in the run up to, and during, the UK 2005 General Election (Jackson 2006b). The

data on the impact of a relationship marketing strategy primarily supports evidence not so much of overt vote winning, or vote switching through online relationship marketing, but generating money and encouraging party membership. Though one small study (Jackson 2008) suggests that long term and effective use of e-newsletters by pioneers did have a small effect on the vote MPs received. More broadly there is evidence that a relationship marketing paradigm applies best to party systems (Johansen 2012) and to online political marketing in party dominated systems, but there is no evidence that this is also the case in candidate centred systems such as the U.S. Our case study will explore the extent that relationship marketing offers an insight into the potential offered by digital technologies within the context of candidate-centred elections. Prior to this we relate theoretical perspectives of the use of the Internet for political communication directly to the relationship marketing paradigm.

Interactivity and hypermedia campaigning

At the core of debate around the role of the Internet in political communication and campaigning is the extent that both are developing an interactive dimension (Lilleker and Vedel 2013). There is discussion surrounding the term interactivity, given the various ways in which a visitor can interact with elements of a website (McMillan 2002; Stromer-Galley 2004; Lilleker and Jackson 2011). We define interactivity as any form of communication that replicates face-to-face conversation: “an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (Rafaeli 1988: 111). Interactivity can involve multiple users and take multiple forms from true conversations to single interjections (Jackson and Lilleker 2009).

Due to the social adaptation to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, users of the platforms are able to befriend, like or follow parties and candidates and then have input into campaign communication. Campaigns are becoming co-created, official communication can sit alongside interjections from a variety of users of digital environments, journalists, academics, activists, satirists and voters who offer their own voice to the conversation. The plethora of opportunities to contribute to this conversation has led to the boundaries between producer and consumer of communication blurring, leading to what James (1990) referred to as producers. This has helped create the conditions where the online environment can be viewed as a communication ecosystem; interdependent, with information free-flowing across platforms and websites.

The view of everyone as communicator leads to questions regarding how any organisation is able to market themselves, and how they harness their activists and turn them into advocates. Political campaigns have been slow to adapt to using interactive tools such as weblogs or social networking tools, showing particular caution in allowing visitors to post directly to their own websites (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Lilleker et al. 2011). Evidence suggests that campaigns largely attempt to earn free labour from their online supporters, but avoid becoming embroiled in lengthy political discussions (Lilleker 2013), due to the controlling logic that dominates political communication (Stromer-Galley 2004). Yet, it is argued that conversational communication may be more appropriate for creating loyalty and building relationships with their online community of supporters (Sweetser 2011). We propose that this can be understood using an adapted version of the loyalty ladder concept (Figure 1). The value of this approach is to pave both direct and indirect routes into the organisation for potential supporters.

Figure 1 about here please

The strategy underpinning online political communications is currently viewed purely from the perspective of meeting general campaign objectives. However, Howard (2006) argues that campaigning has moved into a hypermedia era, where the logic of the campaign is adapting, but also adapting to, the potential and threat from the online communication ecosystem. Hypermedia campaigning builds upon the notion of the postmodern campaign (Norris 2003) embracing the potential of digital technologies. Howard (2006) defines hypermedia campaigning as having a number of strategic functions that fit well with both transactional and relationship marketing paradigms. The balance between components, in terms of how their functionality maps to marketing paradigms, can betray the overall marketing paradigm employed by the campaign strategist.

Firstly, he notes the online environment facilitates the instant transmission of persuasive information. The transmission function fits well with either a transactional or mixed marketing paradigm. Secondly, electronic communication facilitates tailoring content for multiple forms of consumption and dissemination, meeting the needs of journalists, supporters, activists and web browsers alike. Targeting involves designing messages for both media and audiences, meeting the requirements of the communicator, medium and receiver. Targeting is key to engaging information seekers and building a desire to learn more and to be involved due to the relevance of messages and shared desires over outcomes. Thirdly, data can be harvested from online environments through the use of visitor counts, tracking tools, the collection of email addresses, and the rich data within the profiles of subscribing social media users. The uses of data, and the means for collection, are beyond the remit of this paper because they refer more to what the campaigner is doing than what the web visitor

experiences, however data harvesting supports a relationship management strategy. Such data feeds into direct mail and doorstep campaigns by facilitating further tailoring of messages to the user, therefore developing relationships through message relevance and encouraging information seeking. Data gathered online was also used in the last cycle to build customer profiles of each visitor to websites and then using tracking cookies to target advertisements, thus also supporting a transactional or mixed marketing approach (Madrigal 2012). Finally, as there will already be online conversations about the party, candidate and contest, the campaign must be part of that conversation and link into the online communication ecosystem. In order to employ and empower community members, developing their roles as evangelists and activists, items created by the campaign must allow sharing and commenting (Boynton 2009), and the campaign needs to expect adaptation through an iterative “decomposition and re-composition of messages” (Howard 2006: 2). This permits co-ownership of communication, the campaign, and creates the circumstances within which activists work as brand advocates.

Hypermedia campaigning dovetails with the notion of i-branding which describes the way a brand creates value by providing a compelling experience for website visitors (Hankinson and Cowking 1993; Ibeh et al. 2005). Brand perceptions online are created through the provision of a range of one-way and two-way communication tools in order that the brand be perceived as relevant and adhering to the ‘rules’ of online environments (Davis 2010: 313). I-branding argues a brand’s online presence should deliver a mixed marketing model, combining persuasive information consistent with a transactional approach and relational tools that permit interactions with the brand, its personnel and input into communication and product development. Consistent with the functions of hypermedia campaigning, Simmons (2007) proposes four pillars of i-branding. Brands must capture data in order to understand

visitors (harvesting); develop personalised marketing communication tools (targeting); interact asymmetrically and symmetrically (interacting); and provide unique, compelling and shareable content (transmitting). Of these, interaction is argued to be crucial as this facilitates the building of trust and mutuality (Simmons 2008), the foundations for relationship building which are required for a shift towards a relationship marketing paradigm. Our analysis focuses on the extent to which we can identify a relationship marketing paradigm emerging within the context of an election through the detection of i-branding, designed to convert visitors into supporters, community members, evangelists or even activists.

Theoretical framework

Our operationalization firstly involves a content analysis of the online presences of the post-primary candidates standing for the Democrat and Republican parties in 2008 and 2012. At both contests the Democrat candidate was Barack Obama, standing as challenger in 2008 and incumbent in 2012; the Republican party were incumbents in 2008 but John McCain was not president so technically also a challenger, in 2012 the Republican candidate was Mitt Romney. The content analysis uses an adapted version of the Gibson and Ward (2000) schematic, and seeks the presence or absence of fifty-nine features. The coding sheet sought to differentiate the candidates online activity by looking at: vertical information flows (both downward from the campaign and upward from visitors to the campaign); horizontal information flows (Hyperlinks); and interactive information flows (synchronous and asynchronous). The analysis was conducted in the final week of the campaign, the first week of November, during both election cycles.

The features were then categorised as adhering to the functions of the hypermedia campaign: informing, targeting, harvesting data or interactive. The process for categorisation follows

that of previous work (Jackson and Lilleker 2009; Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2013). For every single category we developed an average online performance score (AOP) for each candidate at the election, an average based on dividing the number of features present by the total possible within a category to produce a percentage. This allows direct comparison when categories have different numbers of features within them and has been used frequently to measure adherence to strategies or the functionality of websites (Vaccari 2008; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2013).

Having provided an overview of adherence to the four elements of a hypermedia strategy we develop our analysis of the websites using our derivation of the Ferber et al. (2007) six-part model of interactivity. The model, employed in previous studies of interactivity (Jackson and Lilleker 2009; Lilleker and Malagon 2010; Lilleker and Jackson 2011), differentiates between three modes of communication: one-way, two-way and three-way. Each mode of communication can also offer varying levels of user control. One-way communication can range from the purely monologic to presenting user feedback and evidencing some form of private interaction. Two-way communication ranges from responsive dialogue, a reactive response, to more conversational mutual discourse. Three-way communication is divided into controlled response and public discourse, the latter being completely open and participatory and offers the best evidence of a relationship marketing approach. The features of websites are classified across a scale for the mode of communication and the levels of user control they offer within their context. Drawing on the dichotomy between low user control and the levels of interactivity we assess each campaign based on categorising communication direction and control within marketing paradigms. This element of the analysis focuses on the extent to which the website and linked features facilitated interaction (Jackson et al. 2012).

Table 1 presents our three methodological approaches. Our content analysis is essentially an empirical tool, whereas the second and third are theoretically driven which we have operationalized. There is clearly a difference between the data we are looking at to test Howard's hypermedia campaign and Ferber et al's. model of interactivity. However, there are some aspects of the coding sheet in the content analysis which are also to be found when testing the other two models. That there is some overlap is not surprising given that we are essentially focusing on one main concept, interactivity, from three different angles, which aids triangulation of data and a richer understanding of the extent to which a mixed approach to marketing was evidenced. The results from our analysis are discussed below.

Table 1 about here please

Branding and Relationship building in comparative perspective

The data derived from the operationalization of hypermedia campaigning demonstrates the innovative nature of the Obama campaign in 2008. While we do not have longitudinal data to support this hypothesis, studies indicate that previous elections made shallow use of the Internet, with the candidates largely relying on purely transmitting information (Foot and Schneider 2006). The low adoption of online communication was coupled with the fact that in 2004 there were no widely used social media that could be incorporated into campaign communication. The use of the Meetup website by Howard Dean, Democrat challenger in the primaries, was a conceptual game changer demonstrating that online activists could be harnessed and such environments provided a means for gaining small donations from large numbers, as opposed to targeting rich individuals or corporations to gain large sums. Obama turned this into a strategy across a wide range of features and online platforms.

Figure 2 about here please

As the data presented in Figure 2 shows, this did not mean that features that transmit persuasive information were in any way scaled back, and this is the case for all candidates across the two elections. Rather, the data shows a rebalancing of the use of transactional and relational features. Obama's website incorporated more features that facilitated interaction than transmission, with the sheer number of opportunities to co-create campaign communication overshadowing any other candidate or party in any forthcoming election to date (see for international comparison Lilleker and Jackson 2011). Obama's campaign team also used a highly sophisticated targeting strategy, utilising social networking sites for minority groups, bespoke web content and email. The site also incorporated a range of features that facilitated harvesting data, the heart of which was the bespoke MyBO social network housed within his website.

Obama's interactive campaign strategy was largely replicated in 2012, though there were strategic differences. While slightly more interactive features were included within the website, the tools that facilitated signing up and donating were prioritised. Furthermore, while in 2008 the front page was a news feed that permitted comments from those subscribed to the MyBO network, in 2012 the site prioritised a defence of his record as president. The site also contained a large amount of negative campaign material attacking his opponent Mitt Romney; the message of 'Change' which focused on systemic reform of US politics was also replaced with 'Hope' for a better future focusing more on economic than political reform. However, despite the transition from challenger to incumbent, Obama remained a highly interactive brand that was accessible across multiple platforms and permitted various forms of access. The Obama brand was a co-created brand. Obama supporters were encouraged to

extend the reach of the brand, share messages via their own social networks and work on behalf of the campaign.

The McCain site of 2008 was widely criticised, as was McCain's ability to master new technologies. The McCain web presence largely reflects these criticisms. The site was largely designed to transmit messages, bespoke pages were created for specific groups but there was little of the sophisticated targeting that Obama was concurrently employing. McCain's strategy was closer to that of the 2004 Bush campaign than the 2008 or 2012 Obama campaign. Harvesting data appeared to be a very low priority with limited use of sign-ups, suggesting there was no back-end support to manage that data. McCain's campaign team did not eschew interactive features completely, rather they avoided public interaction. Social network platforms were used, the site contained a small weblog which permitted comments, but largely email was the only mechanism that permitted interaction with the campaign. In 2008 Obama's campaign team ensured they responded to most questions, although Obama himself rarely contributed.

The gap in technology use in 2008, and also the gap in donations with Obama receiving a large amount of small donations from his support network, was largely replicated in 2012. The front end of the Romney website did offer the opportunity to sign-up and donate, but largely that was the end of the similarity. Romney's site in style and functionality replicated that of McCain; though in places the appearance of the site was reminiscent of that of Obama. Romney exactly mirrored Obama's use of features facilitating transmission and targeting, but replicated McCain's strategy for harvesting data and provided few more opportunities to interact. It would thus appear that Romney attempted to position himself as being a sophisticated user of technology, but used his online presences largely to transmit persuasive

messages. Interactive features were much more ephemeral aspects of the website, pushed to the fringes, as opposed to being central to the brand.

Focusing on both the modes of communication and the levels of user control offered, we are able to view nuances within the strategies of each campaign (Figure 3). The Obama website in both 2008 and 2012 used a wide range of features that transmit information, and the increase in 2012 reflects the more complex defensive, persuasive and negative messages on which his campaign centred. In both elections Obama recognised the value of using a monologic style of communication. The differences between McCain and Romney are marginal, although the storage of press releases on the site that characterised McCain's was not a feature employed by Romney. The features that support two-way and three-way modes of communication are where the real differences lie between Democrat and Republican candidates. Obama offered various ways where visitors could leave feedback and gain a response, though much two-way communication was around campaign activism rather than the development of campaign messages or policy proposals. Romney offered few ways for visitors to leave feedback, all of which employed wholly private channels and often it was unclear who would be receiving messages; for example the ability to email the campaign in itself offers little sense who might read the message or if a response might be forthcoming, particularly in an era where automated responses are widely used to manage incoming emails. The divide is magnified for three-way communication. While Obama did not offer every possible means for users to take control of his site, one can also understand why a candidate would not allow that. However, the use of forums, chat areas, blog tools and social networks meant there were multiple means by which site visitors could engage in dialogue with one another and members of the campaign team. In the case of the official Twitter feed, Obama signed his tweets BO to signify which were from him rather than his team. Tweets offer one

form of public interactivity as they can each be responded to, and re-tweeted. Romney relied largely on encouraging site visitors to share material, were it not for his use of Facebook and Twitter the campaign would have had virtually no participatory three-way communication opportunities at all. Therefore, in 2012 both candidates wanted supporters to create a buzz and extend messages online, but only Obama invited the broader range of contributions from his network that suggest a developed relationship marketing approach.

Figure 3 about here please

Our analysis thus suggests that online political marketing in the US followed two divergent paths between 2004 and 2012. Howard Dean gave insights into the power of a relationship marketing approach to online campaigning, and embedded his thinking into Democrat Party strategy during his time as Chairman of the Democrat National Committee. Obama embraced and developed the Dean model, bringing into his campaign team key digital enthusiasts to create a hypermedia campaigning to meet the objectives of a serious presidential campaign. It would have appeared strange had Obama retrenched in 2012 and rejected the use of interactivity. Hence, he continued to forge ahead with a campaign style that adhered to a relationship marketing paradigm.

The Obama model has been replicated to some extent within many election campaigns, but largely at a superficial level (Lilleker and Jackson 2011). The appearance is replicated, but not the substance. This is true of the Romney campaign. The i-branding is one of sophistication, but it is not an interactive brand. Thus the Republican candidates appear locked within a transactional paradigm involving the transmission of persuasive messages designed to win over floating voters within the context on a single contest. This may be

logical from a transactional marketing perspective, particularly given the candidate-centred nature of US politics, coupled with the fact that large swathes of the electorate are reasonably loyal in their allegiances. However, the transactional approach does not encourage long term loyalty; within our discussion we assess the extent that this is desirable within a political context and how online relationship marketing may have the potential to shift voter dynamics as well as their expectations.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis of relationship marketing within online communications during the US 2008 and 2012 election campaigns offer a mixed picture, there are not necessarily common traits applicable to all campaigns. Rather, any trends are to be found within each individual candidate's campaign, so our conclusions have to be specific to each politician rather than to the election campaign as a whole. Therefore, we found that there was a lack of steady evolution across the contests. Rather, there was an evolution in the use of interactivity within the Obama campaign, but we largely found stasis between the McCain and Romney campaigns. We suggest that these differences in online marketing behaviour may have significant impacts in the future.

Given the clear link between I-branding and online marketing in general, we argue that the branding strategies of each candidate reflect their adherence or lack thereof to a relationship marketing approach. Only Obama's campaign built a brand based on an interactive web experience, so being accessible, based around a social movement and permitting co-creation. In contrast, the McCain and Romney campaigns provide a controlled experience designed to sell the candidate and their platforms. Moreover, as we shall see it was only Obama who

offered the mixed marketing approach which is at the heart of i-branding, whereas Republican candidates' campaigns provided a single, and transactional, marketing approach.

In terms of the different elements of a hypermedia campaign, there is evidence of the use of transmission across all campaigns by all candidates, so they sought to appeal to the passively engaged. We also find that targeting is equally used by all candidates as a strategy, suggesting a partial move towards a mixed approach that is designed to appeal to specific voter segments. There is, however, a clear difference in harvesting, only Obama encouraged sign-ups for receipt of communication across multiple platforms. The divergence here is mirrored for interactivity, which is also largely the preserve of Obama. Had social media not existed there would have been no potential to interact with either Republican candidate.

Importantly, Obama and his wife Michelle did use platforms (shown by the use of the BO and MO signatures to specific posts), although the posts were largely informative or thanking his supporters as opposed to encouraging conversation. Therefore, even for Obama interaction is more about mobilising and then responding after mobilisation has taken place and a successful event in the campaign has been staged. In summary, all candidates meet two of the four components of the hypermedia campaign, but only Obama could be argued to meet all four, and even then there is a limitation to how he used interaction.

Our political loyalty ladder is a useful metaphor for understanding how relationship marketing helped address any prior organisational weaknesses for the Democrats. Obama encouraged the passively engaged to become more active, firstly in choosing to receive communication via mobile and digital platforms, which were designed to move visitors to climb the loyalty ladder and get closer to the campaign. In particular, Obama sought to convert Information Seekers and Passive Supporters into the more campaign active

Community Members and Evangelists. The political loyalty ladder applies only to Obama's web presence, where the intention is to get visitors within the broad grassroots organisation to become more directly involved. This is achieved by presenting points of entry into the campaign, persuasive messages and action that can be completed to reach shared outcomes. For Romney, the points of entry are read or donate, there are no opportunities for other means of engagement, and so he was talking primarily to Information Seekers and Passive Supporters.

Our data suggests that there have been some changes in the hypermedia campaign from 2008 to 2012 which have implications for Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy's idea of micro and macro marketing. Of the four components of Howard's (2006) model, two have decreased in popularity across both the Democrat and Republican candidate's websites, one has increased and one does not display a consistent trend. For both candidates the use of features designed to allow transmission and targeting have gone down, but interactivity has increased for both from one election cycle to the next. However, beyond this broad brush trend in the increase in interactivity, there hides a change in use. The nature of interactivity is less concerned with developing dialogue and conversations, and more about interacting with the campaign, such as fundraising. Therefore, the use of hypermedia campaigning appears to be pushing US presidential candidates towards more consideration of the campaigning benefits of the Internet, and less the wider potential benefits on the body politic of idea sharing.

Clearly Obama was much more likely to apply a relationship marketing approach. His average use of interactive features was more than twice that of McCain and three times that of Romney. Obama's usage of relationship marketing increased in 2012, so suggesting an upward trend. This 'headline' is perhaps not surprising, but there is an important story hidden

by this headline. Obama is also more likely to use features that adhere to transactional marketing, and this also increased from 2008 to 2012. This suggests that within the marketing communication mix the balance has shifted slightly towards a transactional approach, and away from relationship marketing. While the gap between McCain and Romney is not as great with relationship marketing, it is interesting that Obama emerges with a clear lead in both categories. Therefore, rather than concluding that Obama is more likely than his two opponents to use relationship marketing, we can broaden this to say that he is more likely to use marketing in general.

The literature suggests that relationship marketing is more likely to exist in party dominated countries like the UK, and less so in candidate centred countries. This is because parties have a membership which need to be recruited, retained and mobilised (Johansen, 2012). However, the dichotomy is not that simple. Both Democrat and Republican parties have members, supporters and loyal voters who the party and their candidates need to mobilise. Obama appears to have been the first to develop a toolkit for successfully achieving this within the context of both a challenger and incumbent contest, creating a powerful offline and i-brand designed to create enthusiasm and channel that enthusiasm into activism. After 2008, both commentators and campaigners around the world looked to learn the lessons from his campaign. There was a discussion of an 'Obamafication' of campaigning, yet maybe Obama's long-term effect is very different to supporting an Americanisation hypothesis. Rather, 2008 and especially 2012 suggest that cumulatively Obama may have created a hybrid model between candidate-centred persuasive communication and party-centred mobilisation tactics. In the former the aim is to persuade citizens to vote, whereas with the latter parties seek to reach voters indirectly by mobilising their activists. Table 2 suggests that a hybrid model targets citizens seeking not just their vote, but also converting them into

activists. In 2008 there was a strategy to build a movement for change around his campaign which was sustained through to 2012; but will this movement, and the communication that nurtured it, expire with the Obama presidency. Can another candidate, perhaps one without the charisma, style and brand narrative of Obama (Escobar 2011), capture public opinion and harness online activism to the same extent?

Table 2 about here please

This study has largely focused on one election, whilst being aware of what happened before it, yet we also need to consider what, if anything, we can read into this election in terms of the potential longer term trends. It is possible that we are witnessing the early stages of a campaigning schism in US politics centred on Party. Or an alternative is that the experience of the 2008 and 2012 elections will encourage the Republicans to learn key lessons for their future use of online political marketing. One possible interpretation is that in 2008 Obama was an outsider who was encouraged to identify and use different communication channels and developed stylistic innovations. Whereas McCain was the more established traditional politician who relied on the channels he had always used. However, in 2012 Obama was the incumbent, implying that he might not need the Internet as much, whereas his challenger Romney was now the outsider. Yet Romney was only marginally more likely to make use of the Internet than McCain. This might imply a growing campaign gap between the Democrats and the Republicans. Or are we witnessing a typical ebb and flow in campaigning advances, so the gains in relationship marketing are specific to Obama and will recede after him?

Typically political actors learn from, adopt and adapt their opponents' innovations. This would support the idea of an ebb and flow, that with a different candidate and campaign team

the online nature of future campaigns may be fundamentally different. An alternative hypothesis is that we are witnessing a surge where one side, the Democrats, is building a campaigning advantage from the other in marketing terms. Both of these ideas would support Bai's (2007) view that the Democrat's national organisation had problems prior to the 2008 election, and that a local grassroots organisation was built up from the bottom-up to fill the vacuum. Vaccari (2008) takes this a stage further by noting that a key component of this activity was at the 'netroots', namely online activism. Obama may not have been the originator of these two complementary campaigning trends, but as a local campaigner by profession he clearly adopted, adapted and improved them. To assess this Figure 4 suggests that we need to consider how the candidates adhere across three scaled dimensions. The first is the communication style campaigns adopt and then the marketing approach, these are measured against systemic factors and then candidates behaviour. This suggests that there is certainly a growing gap between Obama and the Republican candidates. What we note is that with the first two columns, the communication style and marketing model, are not mutually exclusive, a candidate could follow each. It is possible for a candidate to cherry pick what suits them. This may support our earlier idea of a growing hybrid system developing in the US campaigning environment.

Figure 4 about here please

We can identify two types of online relationship marketing, the first we classify as 'false' relationship marketing. Here campaigners are only interested in how they can use web technologies to promote their message, mobilise supporters and generate new resources. The discussion of policy and ideas is of little interest to them, using interactive features it appears

is seen as a means to an end with interaction beyond supporting the campaign an unwanted side effect which will have no impact upon policy positioning, this partially explains the campaigns of each candidate across both contests though clearly McCain and Romney adhered best to this paradigm. An alternative approach is 'real' relationship marketing which either overtly seeks citizen's interaction, or they are at least a welcome by-product, that can contribute to creating a better politics; this seems closest to the reality of Obama's campaign style. It is argued that consultative processes can lead to a form of deliberative democracy (Lees-Marshment 2011), though there is little evidence of this being encouraged even within the highly interactive spaces provided for Obama's online community. What may be key with 'real' relationship marketing is to design web presences around visitors with whom relationships are most desirable and most likely to be reciprocal. Visitors to political sites, in particular those willing to engage in some form of participation within party or candidate sites, are most likely to be core activists. Having encouraged interaction, and gained electorally, the cost for candidates might be to give up some of their political autonomy to a decentralised online audience of activists; hence we might suggest that moving towards an online relationship marketing strategy may signal the death of transactional political marketing within online environments.

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