

# Obama's 2012 Facebook Campaign: Political Communication in the Age of the Like Button

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5     **ABSTRACT.** This article examines the role of social media in contemporary political communication, focusing on Barack Obama's Facebook campaign in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election. Although there is a growing body of literature on online forms of participation, little research exists on the role of social buttons on Facebook (like, comment, and share) as tools of political voice. We use these native interactive features as indicators of how citizens engage with particular political messages.  
10     A content analysis of posts published on Obama's official Facebook page over the two months leading up to Election Day was conducted, along with a detailed measurement of all user interactions for each post. Our analysis indicates that the Obama campaign used Facebook as a tool of top-down promotion, focusing on Obama's personality and as a means of strategically guiding followers to act, rather than as a means of bottom-up empowerment or hybridized coproduction. However, we also found that followers engaged selectively with campaign messages and often interacted more with policy-oriented posts than with promotional ones.

**KEYWORDS.** Barack Obama, campaign, emotions, Facebook, personalization, political communication, presidential election, rhetoric, social media

20     The 2008 U.S. presidential election marked a significant shift in political campaigning, with the Obama campaign making unprecedented use of social media (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011). Three years

later, President Barack Obama broke with convention once again when he publicly announced his reelection bid with a YouTube video and a tweet on April 4th, 2011. The emphasis on different types of social media during the campaign

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reflects their increasing presence in people's daily lives and their potential role in facilitating more direct and interactive communication between politicians and citizens. Citizens increasingly access social media for political news and to share their opinion (Rainie & Smith, 2012; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). To what extent, though, does this intensive activity across digital platforms constitute a paradigm shift in terms of civic engagement with political discourse?

An increasingly rich body of literature has been looking at online political campaigns in order to establish whether politicians are utilizing the Internet's potential to empower citizens and reduce the democratic deficit. Despite extensive claims about a shift to a new paradigm of civic empowerment, existing research has yet to confirm these hopes: Larsson (2013) found that, overall, citizens prefer to stay consumers, and political actors opt for a rather conservative use of the Web. The extent to which increasing levels of access, interaction, and civic literacy can create an "architecture of participation" (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009, p. 232) that will force politicians to engage in more meaningful ways remains to be seen.

This paper looks at Barack Obama's campaign for the 2012 presidential election, focusing on its presence and content on Facebook, as well as the response of followers to particular types of rhetorical strategy and post content. The premise of our study is that users selectively interact with some posts and not with others through Facebook's native features (likes, comments, and shares), and that some messages capture their interest while others are deemed not interesting enough to engage with. For that purpose, we analyzed the Obama campaign's communication content on his official Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/BarackObama](http://www.facebook.com/BarackObama)) in the run-up to the 2012 election, and how users engaged with those messages. In addition to providing us with a glimpse into the president's broader reelection campaign strategy, this quest can also inform our understanding of political communication through social media and the extent to which this constitutes a fundamentally more interactive paradigm of civic engagement.

Despite the proliferation of studies on online political communication, there is little empirical work on engagement through social media (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Existing studies focus either on the strategy of particular campaigns or on the effects of Internet/social media use on social capital and political participation in general. Many of these studies are skeptical about the existence of any particularly positive or paradigm-shifting effects, although Vaccari (2010) argues that we may be witnessing the emergence of a *hybridized model* of top-down strategic control and bottom-up civic empowerment during political campaigns. This study brings together these two conceptual strands to examine the content of Obama's 2012 Facebook campaign and compare it to users' engagement with particular types of messages. There are now several published studies on Obama's 2008 campaign, whose findings and questions regarding innovation, interactivity (or lack of), empowerment (or lack), and different forms of strategic control (e.g., Baldwin-Philippi, 2012) can be used as a benchmark against which to evaluate the 2012 campaign.

### **THE DIGITIZATION OF "THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN" AND THE OBAMA PHENOMENON**

The gradual professionalization of political communication over the last several decades (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002) was a precursor to a rapid and radical shift to a much more intense, strategic, and personalized level of campaigning via new media that has taken place in the last decade. The digitization of the "permanent campaign" has allowed political parties to reach out to both loyal and swing voters throughout the electoral cycle, renewing early hopes regarding the potential of the Web to facilitate dialogic communication—and thus a more substantive relationship—between elected representatives and citizens (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Campaign Web sites were originally used to provide information and mobilize constituents. Howard Dean was the first to give the Internet a prominent role in his campaign in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election (Compton,

2008), but critics have posited that his blog was merely a *facade of interactivity* because he made interactive tools available, but ignored comments from supporters on his blog (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Online campaigning was still at an early stage, with Web sites being treated as “static campaign flyers” (Endres & Warnick, 2004, p. 323) and used merely for disseminating information rather than building dialogue.

The extent to which the use of social media, e-mail campaigns, and widespread grassroots mobilization since 2004 and in particular since 2008 signify a return to a paradigm of more meaningful direct communication between candidates and voters is still debated. Yet, it is clear that the Internet has had an undeniable impact on the ways and means through which the public engages with politics. In a postmortem about the 2008 election, Daou (cited in Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009) wrote that “never before have so many people conversed publicly and never before has the global discourse been so accessible, recursive and durable” (p. 161). As Pearson and O’Connell (2012) note, “[i]n 2009, Twitter was a novelty in politics. In 2012, it’s a necessity.” This echoes the fact that nearly twice as many people used social networking sites (SNSs) in 2011 compared to 2008 (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), with Twitter users increasing from 3 million to 500 million (SemioCast, 2012), and Facebook exceeding 1 billion users in 2012 (Facebook, 2013).

Much research has been carried out on the unprecedented use of social media in the 2008 U.S. election, making Obama’s campaign a seminal case study of social media use in politics (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vaccari 2010; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010). At some point, the 2008 Obama campaign employed up to 100 staff members to work on his social media presence (Hong & Nadler, 2012). In the 2012 election, the prevalence of social media increased even further (see Table 1). Donating was made significantly easier when the Quick Donate function was implemented, wherein a donor’s payment information could be stored so that next time they were prompted to donate through an e-mail, text message, or on social media, they could do so with a single click. The

TABLE 1. Barack Obama’s Online Campaigning in 2012 Compared to 2008

	2008	2012
<b>Facebook fans</b>	2.4 million	32 million
<b>Digital fund-raising</b>	\$533m*	\$690m
<b>Donations under \$200</b>	45% of total donations	67% of total donations

\*In 2012 prices

Obama campaign utilized Twitter’s Q&A sessions feature (<http://askobama.twitter.com>) and created an “Ask Me Anything” thread on Reddit (Reddit, 2012).

Although the literature on the use of social media during the 2012 election campaign is only now emerging, several questions and concerns are being posed that are consistent with points raised by previous studies in the United States and Europe. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with 2012 campaign consultants and strategists, Serazio’s (2014) study shows “how campaign operatives labor to manage political discourse and news agenda(s) in ways antithetical to [the ideals of the Habermasian public sphere], given the opportunities and challenges that new media technologies afford” (p. 759); in an effort to attract swing voters who tend to tune out partisan messages, the president of a political advertising agency interviewed by Serazio admits that “you have to figure out a way of really disassociating yourself from politics to try to get their attention in the first place” (p. 751). Shifting away from political debates appears to help not only attract people’s attention but also control the message. Following a comparison of Barack Obama’s and Mitt Romney’s Facebook output in the run-up to the 2012 election, Bronstein (2013) concludes that “the main advantage of fandom politics over traditional politics is that it discourages dissent and encourages affective allegiances, i.e., it is easier for the candidate to maintain the support of their audience if they like him or her” (p. 185).

Other recent studies on Obama’s use of digital media in 2008 and during his presidency produced mixed results regarding the paradigm-shifting nature of his communications output.

215 In a review of election campaigning across four  
 liberal democracies, Lilleker and Jackson (2011)  
 found that in *all* cases (including Obama's orig-  
 inal campaign), candidates' Web sites "were  
 geared towards furthering the campaign and not  
 220 enhancing public engagement with the demo-  
 cratic process" (p. 190), although they also note  
 that the only example of bottom-up communi-  
 cation was observed on Barack Obama's blog.  
 Similarly, Katz, Barris, and Jain (2013) found  
 225 that despite "the impression of responsiveness"  
 (p. 108), the White House has only created dia-  
 logical opportunities that do not require more  
 than a nominal reaction.

However, we still need to establish the precise  
 rhetorical tools utilized by the Obama campaign  
 230 to better understand the extent to which that  
 discourse was close-ended and strategic or invit-  
 ing of further engagement. Kienpointner (2013)  
 argues that Obama has successfully managed  
 to incorporate rational argumentation into his  
 235 political rhetoric and, by strategically "maneu-  
 vering," to overcome the polarization of partisan  
 discourse, that is, combining the normative ideal  
 of rational deliberation with efficient persuasion.  
 We thus apply the classic Aristotelian model of  
 240 rhetorical strategy (*logos, ethos, pathos*), which  
 has proven to still be a valuable tool for the  
 understanding of political action in contempo-  
 rary settings (Martin, 2013).

Past political campaigns have used a vari-  
 245 ety of rhetorical tools such as informing,  
 building relationships with the voter, personal  
 appeal (directly addressing the audience or using  
 the imperative mood), building a candidate's  
 image, calls to action, denigrating an opponent,  
 250 and defending against an opponent's attacks  
 (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Trammell, Williams,  
 Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). It has also  
 been shown that emotional appeals can be par-  
 ticularly impactful on how citizens respond to  
 255 political messages (Brader, 2005). It is well  
 known that in 2008, Obama put strong empha-  
 sis on hope and looking forward. Indeed, many  
 studies have looked at the rhetoric and language  
 of political candidates, but research is only just  
 260 beginning to look into the nature of interac-  
 tive features on social media (e.g., Bronstein,  
 2013; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; John, 2013),  
 and there are no known studies examining these

in comparison to the rhetoric and content used  
 in Facebook posts, including photographs. 265

### EMERGING PATTERNS OF ONLINE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The question of whether digital campaigns  
 utilize the medium's capacity for democratic  
 dialogue and even coproduction of policy 270  
 (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009), or whether they  
 stick to one-way communication with few  
 participatory features, is part of a broader  
 debate between proponents of the theory of  
 275 *innovation*—the view that social media provide  
 us with space for positive, fact-checked, and  
 decentralized debate, effectively signaling a new  
 paradigm of civic engagement, and those who  
 support the theory of *normalization*—the view  
 that online campaigns and civic attitudes merely 280  
 replicate offline traits and phenomena, such as  
 strategic control, candidate focus, and negative  
 campaigning (Larsson, 2013). The role and atti-  
 tudes of citizens—and how their civic activities  
 can be facilitated or hampered by the medium's  
 285 own filters—are also crucial factors.

It has been argued that social media empower  
 voters, and in particular give young people a  
 tool to express their civic voices. A study by  
 Wells and Dudash (2007) showed that two of the 290  
 most popular sources for political information  
 among young voters are talking to others and  
 the Internet. In fact, 27% of 18- to 29-year-olds  
 even say that SNSs make more of an impact than  
 in-person advocacy in political campaigning 295  
 (Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2011).  
 The same survey also shows that young voters  
 looked first to national newspapers for politi-  
 cal news on the 2012 election campaign, then to  
 what friends shared on Facebook, followed by 300  
 official Facebook campaign pages. Other stud-  
 ies expand this to all ages, revealing that voters'  
 political attitudes and behavior are influenced  
 by everyday conversations with family mem-  
 305 bers or complete strangers (Himmelboim, Lariscy,  
 Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2012; Lilleker, 2006).  
 Some have expressed concerns about the fact  
 that the Internet seems to favor homophily and  
 selective exposure, bringing like-minded people  
 310 together and functioning only to reinforce their



preexisting beliefs, a phenomenon accentuated by sophisticated algorithms that are particularly instrumental across social media, creating a “filter bubble” that restricts the range of perspectives encountered by citizens online (Pariser, 2011).

Interestingly, recent studies (e.g., Vaccari, 2013) show that online political campaigns have also become more efficient at improving reception and acceptance of political messages. This is effectively done when individuals see information diffused through low-threshold activities by supporters, for example, seeing content shared by peers. Also, reinforcement seems less relevant when considering undecided voters, because they are yet to be persuaded. They seek emotional and economic stimuli and cues from the campaign (Lilleker, 2006). However, research has yet to look at how users engage with specific political messages on SNSs and what type of content is deemed more worthy of sharing.

Digital tools themselves can be used to create or contribute to a public conversation among voters, and even though such actions do not necessarily qualify as political conversations, the increasing newsworthiness of viral posts (such as the photo of Barack and Michelle Obama hugging at a campaign rally, which was posted after the 2012 election was called and became the most tweeted photo to date) is a reminder that *user responses* to social media content have become a distinct cultural phenomenon in their own right. On Facebook, users can express affirmation of content with a *like*, voice their opinion with a *comment*, or *share* content with their own network. These metrics can be studied to understand what type of political content engages people, among other potential implications (e.g., impact on public policy and institutional legitimacy) and potential knock-on effects (e.g., benefits for political awareness and spillover to active, offline participation), which fall outside the scope of the present paper. Facebook’s interface, including the architecture of the News Feed (text and image posts are structurally equal, in contrast to other social media platforms) and the usability of the platform’s native features (commenting is easily completed by typing and pressing enter,

while liking and sharing only require a single click), makes it a particularly interesting case from a political communication perspective.

The conversation on Facebook is partly facilitated by posting content, and partly by engaging with existing content through the use of social buttons. These facilitate cross-syndication and quick dissemination of Web content (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). The like button was originally introduced to “replace short affective statements like ‘Awesome’ and ‘Congrats!’” (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 5). Little research exists on the motivation behind why people like on Facebook, but the intuitive assumption is that the number of likes implies exposure, attention, and some sort of affirmation, ratification, or endorsement of what is posted. Essentially, a post with many interactions has evidently grabbed more attention and spread more widely, whereas a post with fewer interactions has not been deemed worthy or interesting to engage with. Sharing on social media is an active practice of communication and distribution. It is not sharing in the traditional sense where you give something, so that you consequently have less. It is a nonsacrificial act of participation, benefiting from the positive connotations of the traditional concept of sharing (John, 2013). Hence, it is a less costly and lower-level form of participation, but still signifies dissemination, exposure, and citizen dialogue.

Having noted that, SNSs are merely a *platform* facilitating communication to and between voters. Pearson and O’Connell (2012) argue that it is not the number of followers that determines one’s influence on Twitter; it is how one uses those 140 letters. Metzgar and Maruggi (2009) contend that social media is just a tool and cannot replace “message, motivation, or strategy” (p. 141). Similarly, Vaccari (2010) reiterates the role of contextual factors, arguing that technology is merely the driver of preexisting motivations. Hence, the medium-specific aspects of a particular campaign—such as Facebook’s native features—ought to be examined in conjunction with fundamental social, cultural, political, and psychological aspects of political communication and engagement.

It could be argued that the emergence of civic consumerism—which this type of user-oriented

selective online engagement is part of—poses challenges for democratic engagement and traditional notions of civic duty, because citizens and especially young people demand to see the relevance of issues to their own everyday lives (Gerodimos, 2008, 2012). Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s modus operandi, that is, that “[a] squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 296) raises further questions about the role of empathy and values in contemporary civic engagement through social media.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

This study seeks to examine how people respond to specific political messages online using social buttons as metrics of civic engagement. Based on this context, our two starting assumptions are that (a) Facebook interactions such as liking, commenting and sharing are part of the everyday conversation that represents and shapes individuals’ political attitudes; and (b) the number of interactions on Facebook posts more or less reflects what captures followers’ attention, at least at a basic quantitative level. Focusing on the 2012 Obama campaign on Facebook, the aim of the study is to analyze the content of campaign posts and the response of followers and, more broadly, to examine what these patterns of interaction tell us about the depth and interactivity of online political communication and the potential for meaningful civic engagement.

In particular we pose the following research questions:

**RQ1. Content/Strategy:** What were the main types of posts, themes, and rhetorical tools used by the Obama campaign on Facebook, and did these constitute a top-down strategic communications output or an attempt to foster two-way engagement with voters?

**RQ2. Reception/Engagement:** Which of the frames, policy areas, and rhetorical devices used were most successful in terms of Facebook follower engagement (measured through the number of likes, comments, and shares)?

For the purposes of this study we conducted a content analysis of all 166 posts<sup>1</sup> published on the Obama campaign’s official Facebook page over 67 days, leading up to Election Day, that is, from September 1 to November 6, 2012. Three of these posts were photo albums and were not included in the final coding ( $N = 163$ ) as they were classified as folders (groups of many pictures). Every post was recorded onto a spreadsheet, with text, picture, video, and hyperlink as appropriate, and, along with these, the number of interactions (see Figure 1). The coding process involved looking at the impact of content (themes and rhetoric), structure (graphics, text length), and strategy (frequency of posts, temporal context, which day of the week posts were published) on the number of likes, comments, and shares that each post received. A higher number of interactions was assumed to indicate a higher level of engagement with the post content by Facebook users.

The codes used were a mixture of select codes from past literature along with codes deduced from the content and rhetoric of the posts. For example, Benoit’s functional approach, which examines the division between acclaims, attacks, and defense strategies (Benoit & Benoit, 2005) was employed to compare sentiment with past campaign communication strategies. Additionally, the coding scheme featured six categories deduced from the samples: post structure, Aristotelian rhetoric, rhetorical devices, policy themes, picture content, and call to action. These were further divided into 46 different codes, which were interpreted in dichotomous categories, sorted by present (1) or absent (0) for each post (Trammell et al., 2006). (For intercoder reliability see Table 2.) The data was reviewed twice to refine the discovered codes

FIGURE 1. Sample post from Barack Obama’s official Facebook page.



TABLE 2. Coding Categories for Content Analysis and Intercoder Reliability

Coding categories	Variables	Cohen's kappa*
Benoit's functional approach	<b>Acclaim</b> (person/policy) <b>Attack</b> (person/policy), <b>Defense</b>	<b>.732</b> ( $p = .005$ ) <b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ )
Aristotelian rhetoric	<b>Logic</b> , <b>None</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ )
	<b>Credibility</b> <b>Emotion</b>	<b>.857</b> ( $p = .001$ ) <b>.865</b> ( $p = .001$ )
Rhetorical device	<b>Question</b> , <b>Policy</b> statement, <b>Fact</b> /statistic, <b>Collective</b> appeal, <b>Personal</b> appeal, <b>Quote</b> , <b>Humor</b> , <b>Celebrity</b> endorsement <b>Call to Action</b> <b>Urgency</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ ) <b>.815</b> ( $p = .001$ ) <b>.865</b> ( $p = .001$ )
Call to action	<b>Donate</b> , <b>Buy</b> /offer, <b>Competition</b> , <b>Vote</b> , <b>Support</b> /Get involved, <b>Find out</b> more <b>Share</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ ) <b>.815</b> ( $p = .001$ )
Policy themes	<b>Foreign policy</b> , <b>Unemployment</b> , <b>Economy</b> , <b>Health care</b> , <b>Energy</b> , <b>Education</b> , <b>Taxes</b> , <b>Women's rights</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ )
Post structure	<b>Video</b> , <b>Picture</b> , <b>Text</b> only, <b>Hyperlink</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ )
Photo content	<b>Barack Obama</b> , <b>Michelle Obama</b> , <b>Daughters</b> , <b>Joe Biden</b> , <b>People</b> , <b>Politicians</b> , <b>Promotion</b> , <b>Policy</b> , <b>Quote</b> , <b>Prompt to share</b>	<b>1</b> ( $p < .001$ )

\*On a random 10% of the sample, two coders, blind coding

and categories (Saldaña, 2009). Because pictures are very prominent in Facebook posts, often being the main carrier of a message or complementing the written text, the coding process looked at the picture and text in a post

combined. However, this merely involved looking at the textual content and explicit elements in a picture (Table 2), and did not interpret connotations or associations that a picture might evoke in a reader. Video and link content was

not analyzed, because this is not immediately visible to the user browsing the posts on the Obama campaign's Facebook page. These elements require a level of active (albeit minimal) effort from the user—opening the link or pressing the play button—who only then is exposed to the message contained therein.

For the data analysis we initially used Mann-Whitney's U to compare the means of likes, comments, and shares across all the dichotomous coding categories. We then run multiple regression tests, treating the various post content/structure features as independent variables and likes ( $R^2 = .636$ ), comments ( $R^2 = .466$ ), and shares ( $R^2 = .461$ ) as the dependent variable. Based on those findings we then run an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test to further cross-check the impact of various factors on likes, comments, and shares, while controlling for certain variables that appeared to have a significant effect.

## FINDINGS

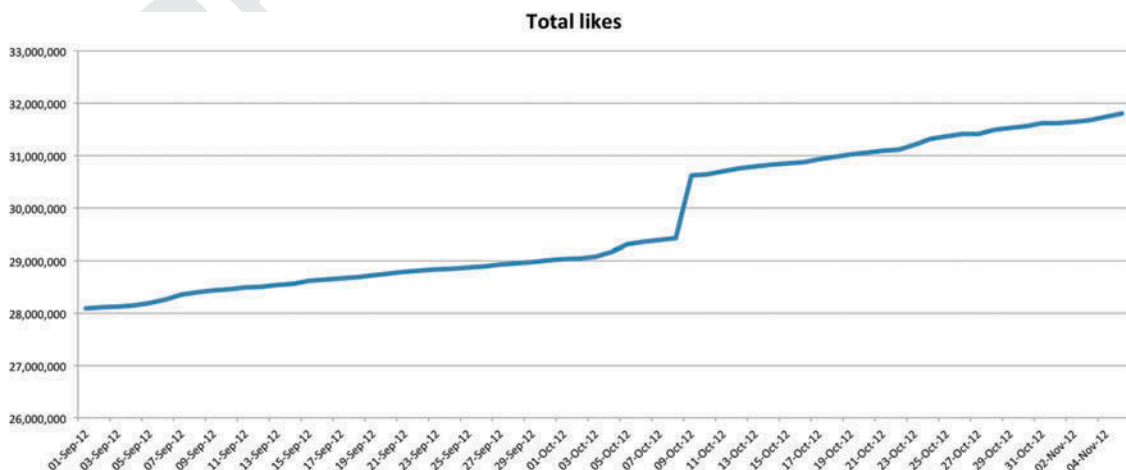
Our analysis indicates that, overall, the Obama campaign treated Facebook as a tool of top-down promotion, as opposed to a means of substantive civic interaction. Furthermore, while messages were highly personalized, both in terms of focusing on Obama's personality and directly addressing the user, they focused more

on the symbolic and affective aspects of political communication than on political argumentation and issue-oriented campaigning. However, interestingly, campaign followers were quite selective about which messages they engaged with, often rejecting certain types of posts (if we accept the study's premise that not interacting with a post can be considered an indication of rejection or selective engagement on the part of Facebook users). Before presenting the substantive findings in more detail, we first outline the frequency, volume, and intensity of campaign messages and user interactions across the two-month period.

### *Campaign and User Interaction Overview*

Although the number of page likes (i.e., the total number of users who effectively subscribed to Barack Obama's Facebook page) increased from 28 million in early September of 2008 to 31.8 million in early November (see Figure 2)—meaning that an increased number of users were exposed to the president's messages in their Facebook News Feed—the number of post interactions remained mainly steady with a slowly increasing trend line and large fluctuations. Consistency in the social media communication strategy was apparent in that two to three posts were published on most days, with an average length of 19.8 words each (see Figure 3). Limiting Facebook communications to such a

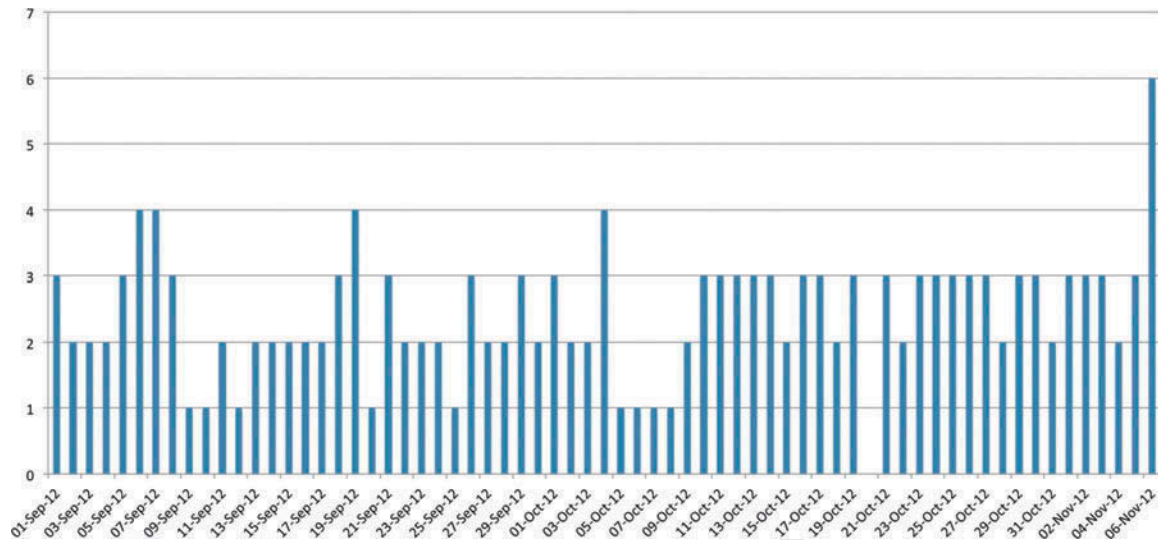
FIGURE 2. Time line—Total likes of Obama's official Facebook page.



Source: InsideFacebook.com 2012



FIGURE 3. Number of Facebook posts published daily by the Obama campaign (September 1st to November 6th, 2012).



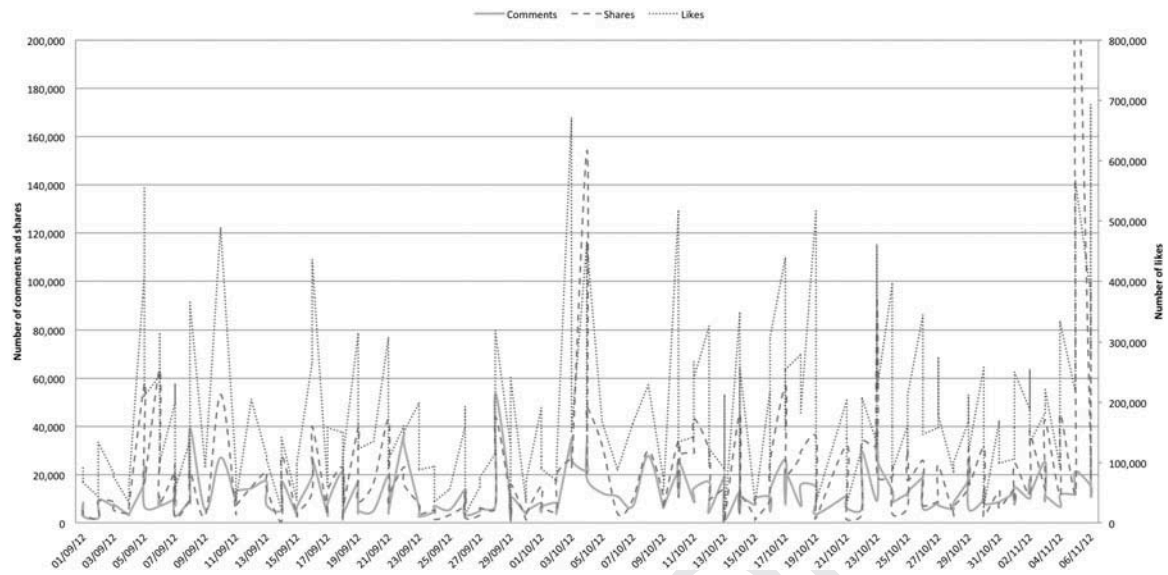
570 small core of posts per day maintains a stable  
 amount of output in order to avoid the contrast  
 between busy and slow news days (or between  
 periods of aggressive or positive and cautious or  
 defensive campaigning); additionally, it ensures  
 575 that followers' attention is not diluted, given  
 especially the mechanics of Facebook's per-  
 sonalization algorithm, which prioritizes and  
 manipulates the visibility of posts on a user's  
 News Feed (Pariser, 2011).

580 The stable and relatively small number of  
 posts comes into stark contrast with the highly  
 volatile and energetic user interaction with those  
 posts (see Figure 4). Beyond the weekly flow  
 of likes (peaking on Wednesdays and dipping  
 585 on Saturdays), comments (dipping on Sundays),  
 and shares (dipping on Fridays to Sundays),  
 the occasional peaks in interactions highlight  
 key events, such as the debates, the Obamas'  
 20th anniversary, and Election Day. Although it  
 590 is obvious that this graph only captures events  
 mentioned by the campaign itself, it still gives  
 us an interesting overview of how followers  
 interacted with these events. For example, the  
 day after the third debate (October 23, 2012), a  
 595 post stated, "Share this if you agree: President  
 Obama won the final debate . . ." and the  
 number of interactions peaked for likes, com-  
 ments, and shares. Furthermore, the comparative

overlay of all likes, shares, and comments across  
 the 67 days of analysis in Figure 4 shows that  
 600 people interact differently with different posts.  
 For example, some posts peak in comments but  
 not in likes and shares.

Although a like is the easiest way to engage  
 (it only requires a click), and therefore receives  
 605 significantly more interactions than comments  
 or shares, the variation across dates and events  
 suggests that the three interactive features are  
 different not only in terms of effort. As demon-  
 610 strated below, they also signify different mean-  
 ings and constitute different ways of engaging  
 with a given message. This may be more appli-  
 cable to younger voters in particular, who are  
 more likely to perceive online interactions as  
 a viable form of political participation: a like  
 615 is arguably a way of affirming or ratifying that  
 which is said; a comment allows for voicing  
 one's opinion, and a share is about sharing  
 information with one's own connections. The  
 changed perception of political participation is  
 620 also evident in that, according to some studies,  
 young social media users are not as interested in  
 more costly activities such as fund-raising, but  
 rather in debating and establishing relationships  
 with the candidate and fellow supporters, which  
 625 can be confined to mere interactions on a social  
 media platform (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008).

FIGURE 4. Overlay of likes, comments, and shares per post (September 1st to November 6th, 2012).



**Campaign Content and Strategy:  
Facebook as a Tool of Top-Down  
Personalized Promotion**

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The overwhelming majority of the messages posted by the campaign in the 67 days before the 2012 election were picture posts, that is, they featured a single photo, usually along with an accompanying caption, text, or commentary (see Table 3). This aligns well with Facebook’s ethos about sharing visual content, because the platform recently announced a design change to make picture content more prominent (Forbes, 2013). More than half of the

photo posts featured Barack Obama himself—actively speaking, hugging supporters, on the phone, or with an affective appeal where he is with his family or with a clear expression of readiness to take on a second term—while a further 13% featured his wife and/or daughters alone (see Table 4). Very few videos are posted and the vast majority of hyperlinks link to the campaign Web site ([www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com)) or other campaign sites, with only a few linking to the following external sources: White House Blog, Beyoncé Web site (endorsement),

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TABLE 3. User Interaction with Different Post Formats

All posts (N = 163)	Picture	Video	Text-only	Hyperlink
n	154	7	2	125
%	94.5	4.3	1.2	76.7
Likes (Mean)	195,252	38,468	126,065	174,146
Comments (Mean)	12,782	3,826	6,169	12,509
Shares (Mean)	21,842	4,856	4,835	17,753

TABLE 4. Applying Benoit’s Functional Approach

Overall posts (N = 163)	n	%	Mean likes per post	Mean comments per post	Mean shares per post
<b>Acclaims</b>	78	47.9	213,944	13,331	21,672
<i>character policy</i>	49	30.1	239,481	13,283	20,935
	29	17.8	171,989	13,954	23,290
<b>Attacks</b>	31	19.0	178,502	15,656	24,455
<i>character policy</i>	15	9.2	161,980	13,142	19,484
	17	10.4	190,389	17,492	29,315
<b>Defense</b>	0	0	—	—	—

655 Red Cross donations (Hurricane Sandy), and  
The Daily Show (interview with Obama).

660 Moving on to the content of the text accom-  
panying the images, we found that Obama's  
2012 Facebook campaign was mostly posi-  
665 tive and avoided highly polarizing or negative  
attacks. Using Benoit's functional approach in  
the coding process allowed us to draw com-  
parisons to previous studies using the same  
theoretical framework (Benoit & Benoit, 2005;  
Compton, 2008; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008;  
Trammell et al., 2006). No defensive responses  
were made to Romney's attacks (although the  
"Obama Truth Team" Facebook page was more  
concerned with deflecting attacks and counter-  
maneuvers), which is somewhat different from  
670 previous campaigns, although, even in the past,  
defensive responses were only used on a small  
scale (Compton, 2008).

675 Nearly half of the posts ( $N = 163$ ) on the  
official Obama Facebook page were acclaims  
followed by a considerably smaller number of  
opponent attacks (Table 4). Compared to the  
2008 social media campaign, where the divide  
between character- and policy-focused acclaims  
was about 55%/45%, respectively (Compton,  
680 2008), stronger emphasis was placed on char-  
acter acclaims in the 2012 election and less on pol-  
icy (62%/38%). Furthermore, while 78.8% of  
policy statements in the 2004 Bush versus Kerry  
campaign were attacks against the opponent,  
685 only 52% were attacks against character and  
policy in this campaign. Sixty-four percent of  
policy statements included acclaims of Obama's  
own character and policies, suggesting a more  
positive tone. This is consistent with previous  
690 studies of both the 2008 (Lilleker & Jackson,  
2011) and the 2012 (Bronstein, 2013) cam-  
paigns, which found that the Obama team opted  
for a broadcast message of hope and enthu-  
siasm, while only using negative campaign-  
ing through "under the radar" microtargeting  
(Serazio, 2014, p. 745).

700 In terms of the rhetorical tools employed, the  
case for Obama is mostly built on emotions  
(pathos) and credibility (ethos) and less so on  
rational arguments (logos). In fact three-quarters  
of character acclaims use emotionally charged  
phrases such as "Obama has revealed himself to  
be a man who cares about all Americans," ". . .

a president who stands up for all Americans . . .  
," and "President Obama's leadership has made  
705 America stronger, safer, and more secure . . ." A  
key vehicle for the framing of Obama's credibil-  
ity was quotes: nearly one-third of all posts used  
quotes to make a point and the great majority  
of them contained some form of emotive lan-  
710 guage and credibility appeal. Only one-quarter  
of posts contained policy statements, which is  
very similar to the proportion of policy messages  
featuring in blogs during the 2004 campaign  
(Trammell et al., 2006). 715

Given the highly personalized nature of the  
American political system, it is not unusual  
for a presidential campaign to focus on the  
person of the individual candidate as opposed  
720 to more political, institutional, or processual  
aspects of the campaign. Even so, our anal-  
ysis shows that Obama's reelection campaign  
on Facebook focused predominantly on his per-  
sonality and family, rather than on his policies,  
ideas, track record, or opponent, which is some-  
725 what surprising for a sitting president whose first  
term featured historic executive, legislative, and  
judicial debates and decisions.

Crucially, policy posts were not framed as  
opportunities for substantive debate or engage-  
730 ment, that is, "conversation starters"; they were  
used as hooks for a call to action, such as sharing  
(50%), showing support (7%), voting (7%), and  
finding out more (2.4%). This finding reflects  
735 more broadly the entire discourse of the cam-  
paign, which was close-ended, promotional, and  
highly guarded or controlled. For example, out  
of 163 posts, only nine contained any type of  
question, perhaps a somewhat crude but still  
740 important indicator of whether the discourse  
figuratively or literally attempts to engage the  
audience in a substantive discussion. Even more  
tellingly, out of those nine questions only one  
could be characterized as potentially substan-  
745 tive, but even that was tied to a call for action  
("Why are you voting for President Obama?  
Leave your No. 1 reason in the comments and  
tag a friend to let them know"). All other  
questions were fully procedural or promotional  
750 ("Got a phone? Got Internet? GET HIS BACK.  
Call.barackobama.com"; "Voting by mail? Put  
a stamp on that ballot and send it in today";  
"Would you describe yourself as a 'talker'?

TABLE 5. User Interaction with Different Types of Rhetorical Device

<i>All posts</i> ( <i>N</i> = 163)	<i>n</i>	%	Mean likes per post	Mean comments per post	Mean shares per post
<b>Call to action</b>	113	69.3	179,970	12,224	21,867
<b>Personal appeal</b>	97	59.5	170,743	11,572	22,062
<b>Quote</b>	49	30.1	221,241	<b>14,894</b>	23,437
<b>Urgency</b>	45	27.6	<b>151,480</b>	<b>10,482</b>	15,409
<b>Policy statement</b>	42	25.8	177,753	13,786	<b>25,601</b>
<b>Collective appeal</b>	41	25.2	195,118	12,192	22,654
<b>Fact/statistic</b>	22	13.5	139,762	11,091	<b>14,606</b>
<b>Humor</b>	10	6.1	<b>257,067</b>	11,977	21,082
<b>Question</b>	9	5.5	187,568	11,961	14,365

TABLE 6. User Interaction with Different Types of Call to Action

<i>Call to action</i> <i>posts (n = 113)</i>	<i>n</i>	%	Mean likes per post	Mean comments per post	Mean shares per post
<b>Call to share</b>	41	36.3	<b>221,204</b>	14,557	36,450
<b>Show support</b>	22	19.5	172,682	10,789	12,987
<b>Vote</b>	18	15.9	214,071	13,549	21,444
<b>Find out more</b>	15	13.3	133,789	12,420	13,235
<b>Donate</b>	15	13.3	125,883	11,113	11,124
<b>Buy/special offer</b>	5	4.4	72,241	4,677	4,000
<b>Join competition</b>	4	3.5	<b>67,807</b>	6,401	4,645

Hit the phones for the president if you've got Barack's back").

Calls for action and personal appeal (i.e., the use of imperative mood in the sentence structure toward the reader, prompting some sort of action in response to the post) were the two most-used rhetorical devices (see Table 5). Interestingly, on Howard Dean's blog during the 2004 primaries campaign, only one-quarter of posts focused on making the reader feel part of the campaign (Trammell et al., 2006), while 71.8% of posts in Obama's 2012 campaign used personal or collective appeal. This could be attributed to a number of factors, such as the much more direct and personal mode of communication on Facebook, the increasing importance of personalization in contemporary political culture, and the fact that the Obama campaign has strategically and consistently utilized social media to mobilize public support and facilitate a sense of belonging (Katz et al., 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011).

The prominence of mobilization is evident in the campaign's Facebook strategy, with 69.3% of posts prompting engagement in a wide range of subcategories recognized (see Table 6). Seven types of call to action were recognized, with "prompting to share" being mostly used. The implied message in most posts was to use the native share function on Facebook to spread the message and make Obama's campaign more

visible on the social media platform. Donations are only mentioned in 9.2% of posts overall, compared to Howard Dean's blog campaign in 2003 and 2004, which encouraged donations in 15.7% of posts (Trammell et al., 2006). However, Obama's campaign encouraged individual involvement (show support, share) in 38.7% of overall posts compared to Dean's 12.5% (Trammell et al., 2006), illustrating a more intensive usage of social media to mobilize grass roots and disseminate information (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), but also a strategy that is much more professional and segmented in order to match the particular traits and user trends of each platform.

Finally, the language employed across posts largely constitutes a very personal and direct communication approach. As indicated earlier, much focus is placed on President Obama himself, as well as employing personal appeals that attempt to close the discursive and political gap between the reader and the candidate. Words such as *you*, *your*, *you've*, *you're*, and *yours* occur 136 times throughout the 163 posts. Additionally, the words *we*, *we've*, *us*, and *our* occur 67 times, and the word *friend* or *friends* occurred 19 times in the context of phrases such as "let your friends know" or "your friends should see this." Facebook's core purpose of connecting people was appropriated by the Obama campaign as it sought to emulate the interpersonal connectivity that is native to the platform.



**User Response and Engagement:  
Rewarding Positivity; Resisting  
Promotions**

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As mentioned earlier, the great majority of the Obama campaign’s Facebook posts in the run-up to the election featured images. We found that the presence of Obama in a photo post had a statistically significant positive effect on the number of likes ( $r = .373, p < .001$ ), comments ( $r = .363, p < .001$ ), and shares ( $r = .265, p = .002$ ) it received. The presence of the First Lady Michelle Obama or of Obama’s daughters in a photo had an even more engaging effect: such posts received on average 70%–80% more likes than the other most popular type of post category, that is, photos featuring the president on his own.

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Our analysis of campaign followers’ reactions to its Facebook posts produced a surprising dichotomy: substantive posts (about policy or even about Obama’s character) were far more engaging and successful in getting people to share them than personal appeals and promotional calls. One major exception to that was Calls to Share: such prompts had a statistically significant effect on likes ( $r = .199, p = .015$ ) as well as on actual shares ( $r = .309, p < .001$ ; the average number of shares for posts when prompted to do so was 36,450, while for all other posts the average was 15,508 shares) and even more so when that prompt was embedded in a photo ( $r = .444, p < .001$ ), regardless of whether the president appeared in the photo or not.

It is worth pointing out that one of the two text-only posts received significantly higher levels of attention (230,000 likes, 7,126 comments, and 9,006 shares) than the other:

President Obama: “We don’t turn back. We leave no one behind. We pull each other up.” If this sounds like the America you believe in, keep us moving forward: <http://OFA.BO/FzuNUH>—September 7, 2012

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In contrast, the other post received only 22,469 likes, 5,212 comments, and 664 shares:

Last call: Enter before midnight for your chance to join Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and President Obama for an evening in New York. We’ll fly you in with a guest: <http://OFA.BO/eW6Anj>—September, 14, 2012

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This contrast in user responses to the two types of messages (value-oriented emotive message versus promotional) is precisely typical of how followers reacted to the campaign on Facebook. It also reiterates the power of language, even when there is no visual aid.

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Furthermore, during the 67-day period, the campaign posted seven videos on the official Facebook page. Our analysis shows that these videos failed to engage users: posts featuring a video had a statistically significant *negative* correlation with the number of likes ( $\beta = -.358, p < .001$ ), comments ( $\beta = -.276, p = .003$ ), and shares ( $\beta = -.235, p = .012$ ). In fact, video posts received much less interactions even than text-only posts (see Table 7). The reason for this may be the extra time and effort required

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TABLE 7. User Interaction with Posts Featuring Photos

Picture posts (n = 154)		n	%	Mean likes per post	Mean comments per post	Mean shares per post
<b>Barack Obama</b>		78	50.6	246,610	15,392	27,941
<b>People</b>		40	26.0	159,986	9,337	11,103
<b>Policy</b>		33	21.4	159,679	14,132	25,109
<b>Quote</b>		32	19.3	222,838	16,300	27,487
<b>Michelle Obama</b>		18	11.7	310,975	14,167	26,222
<b>Politicians</b>		17	11.0	163,319	14,490	21,156
<b>Promotions</b>		11	7.1	61,374	6,274	4,133
<b>Joe Biden</b>		10	6.5	270,473	14,470	26,802
<b>Prompting to share</b>		9	5.8	265,159	14,799	72,516
<b>Event</b>		7	4.5	88,728	7,055	6,585
<b>Celebrities</b>		4	2.6	71,951	4,662	7,430
<b>Obama’s daughters</b>		3	1.9	449,420	15,061	32,904
<b>Map</b>		3	1.9	75,305	7,681	6,273
<b>Obama and Michelle</b>		10	6.5	421,482	20,158	39,097
<b>Obama and daughters</b>		3	1.9	449,420	15,061	32,904

to digest the message in a video. Although the message in an image or text is instantly apparent, a video requires playing and watching the video (which in turn requires adequate bandwidth, sound, and privacy). This may suggest that videos are less efficient at reaching a Facebook audience whose News Feeds are already saturated with updates from friends and other fan pages. Or it could merely indicate that campaign followers have particular expectations (and receive the corresponding gratifications) from different platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Hence, Facebook may not be a particularly efficient way of promoting a video.

Moving to how users engaged with different types of rhetoric and post content, the literature on political rhetoric and persuasion has long acknowledged the salience of the three elements of Aristotelian rhetoric (logos, pathos, and ethos) and the impact of political messages that are “reasonable, passionate, and reflective of the character of the speaker” (Triadafilopoulos, 1999, p. 741), respectively. Our analysis shows that posts making use of one or more of those elements were much more engaging (see Figure 5). Emotive language in particular dominates much of the campaign on Facebook, being employed in more than half of the posts (see Table 8) and emerged as one of the three most impactful variables (the other two being photos of Obama and prompts to share). The use of pathos seems to have struck a chord with campaign followers because emotional

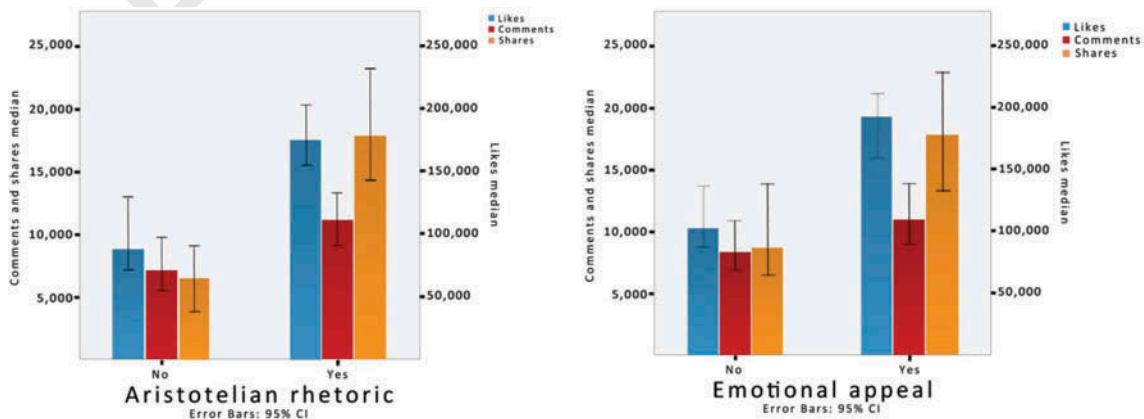
TABLE 8. User Interaction with Posts Featuring Elements of Aristotelian Rhetoric

All posts (N = 163)	n	%	Mean likes per post	Mean comments per post	Mean shares per post
<b>Pathos (emotion)</b>	94	57.7	226,687	14,153	25,782
<b>Ethos (credibility)</b>	68	41.7	226,865	14,939	24,893
<b>Logos (logic)</b>	37	22.7	167,142	14,565	24,195
<b>None</b>	39	23.9	118,236	8,559	10,386

acclaims received on average 50,000 more likes than nonemotional ones. Similarly, 59.5% of posts denigrating the opponent used emotional language compared to 24.4% in the 2004 campaign between George Bush and John Kerry (Trammell et al., 2006).

Words such as *care, trust, cheer on, fired up* and *fighting for* were seen as appealing to emotions, and, contrary to Bronstein (2013), we found that this type of discourse did have a significant impact on how much people liked ( $\beta = .273, \eta_p^2 = .080, p < .001$ ), commented on ( $\beta = .208, \eta_p^2 = .053, p = .006$ ), and shared posts ( $r = .213, p = .007$ ) even when having controlled for the presence of photos and prompts to share. This is in line with the contentions that the emotional dimension of rhetoric is an increasingly vital part of contemporary political communication and youth engagement with the potential to initiate their involvement and influence their voting choice (Brader, 2005).

FIGURE 5. User interaction with posts featuring emotional appeal.



The campaign was also successful in engaging followers with messages focusing on Obama’s ethos, that is, his credibility and status, because such messages received more likes ( $U = 1981, p < .001$ ), comments ( $U = 2851.5, p < .001$ ), and shares ( $U = 1964, p < .001$ ) than non-ethos posts. The strategic emphasis on hope and enthusiasm, as opposed to the use of negative or attack messages, was rewarded by followers: positive acclaims were more likely to be shared than other types of posts ( $\eta_p^2 = .043, p = .016$ ) even when controlling for prompts to share, which as mentioned below emerged as a key factor.

The inclusion of logical reasoning (logos) did not increase the likelihood of a post receiving more likes. This is interesting as it may indicate the limits of reason in contemporary political discourse (or it could simply mean that the Obama campaign was just not as good at framing logical arguments as they were at projecting emotions and credibility). However, citizens who followed the Obama campaign on Facebook were willing to engage in a public dialogue on posts that utilized rational argumentation, because the use of logos had a statistically significant relationship with the number of shares ( $U = 1489, p = .001$ ) and comments ( $U = 1826, p = .045$ ) and they still engaged substantively with policy content (see Table 9). This can actually be attributed to the presence of particular policy themes: education posts were by far the most popular, while statements on taxes ( $\eta_p^2 = .029, p = .045$ ) and foreign policy ( $\eta_p^2 =$

.027,  $p = .052$ ) attracted significantly greater numbers of comments, having controlled for the presence of a photo.

On the other hand, posts featuring action-oriented personal appeal (e.g., “If you’re standing with the president, we’ve got a free sticker for you” or “Make sure your friends and family know the choice on taxes in this election”) were less likely to be liked ( $U = 2515, p = .020$ ). Similarly, we found that posts about competitions ( $\beta = -.173, p = .017$ ), promotional links ( $\beta = -.235, p = .029$ ), and photos of celebrities ( $\beta = -.318, p = .045$ ) received significantly less user interaction.

### DISCUSSION: THE POWER AND LIMITS OF POLITICAL PERSONALIZATION

Our analysis showed that the Obama campaign made highly strategic and focused use of Facebook as a tool for promoting its key messages and, crucially, for mobilizing supporters to act on its behalf. The main focus of the posts was Obama’s personality and family, while rhetorically, the campaign depended mostly on emotions (pathos) and to a lesser extent on credibility (ethos). Although policy statements did feature during the sampled period, they were obscured by a preoccupation with Obama’s character and also by daily calls to action. These findings largely concur with recent studies (Bronstein, 2013; Katz, Barris & Jain, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Serazio, 2014) that challenge the widespread perception of the Obama campaign’s digital presence as revolutionary and emphasize the continuing importance of campaign strategy.

A closer look at Obama’s own style, as well as of the particular political context within which the 2012 campaign took place, offers an interesting explanation for the campaign’s focus on personality rather than record. Foley (2013) argues that the gap between Obama’s grand rhetorical vision and everyday policy pragmatism has produced a certain kind of presidential ambiguity that hampers his attempt to connect with the American people. Negotiating that gap—which involves

TABLE 9. User Interaction with Different Policy Areas and Issues

Policy statements (n = 42)			Mean	Mean	Mean
	n	%	likes per post	comments per post	shares per post
<b>Unemployment</b>	11	26	170,319	17,531	23,778
<b>Women’s Rights</b>	11	26	183,370	12,021	26,774
<b>Taxes</b>	10	24	156,003	22,259	21,557
<b>Education</b>	9	21	<b>214,364</b>	19,221	<b>27,961</b>
<b>Economy</b>	9	21	198,031	21,511	24,759
<b>Health Care</b>	8	19	160,236	13,182	22,466
<b>Foreign Policy</b>	4	10	198,729	22,213	26,897
<b>Energy</b>	4	10	170,432	<b>23,828</b>	24,812

defending, contextualizing, and explaining complex policies and decisions that the president may genuinely believe to be the right ones—is a process of translation that requires substantive engagement with people’s realities and knowledge gaps. This process has been impeded not only by Obama’s own style of decision making, which tends to be introverted and reflective (Foley, 2013), but also by the actions of other actors in the public sphere of the United States. Furthermore, the adverse economic circumstances of Obama’s first term have meant that a core part of his record could only be framed as what Foley calls a “negative achievement,” that is, the economy not getting worse. In this context, the capacity of new media such as Facebook to allow for potentially direct communication between the president and the public could have provided him with a way of bypassing the “noise” produced by other political actors.

Despite the intensive use of personalization in a rhetorical attempt to close the gap between the candidate and his supporters, the discourse of the Obama campaign on Facebook was highly managed and close-ended: only one out of 163 posts asked followers to consider what could be classified as a substantive question. Therefore, although the campaign successfully used Facebook to extend and mobilize its fan base, the strategic discourse did not encourage the creation of loops of feedback, which are key to building a dialogic relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998). By focusing on Obama’s family and personality, the campaign essentially controlled the discussion, because neither of these topics is particularly conducive to substantive and in-depth political engagement on the part of the citizens. Although policy discourse could be equally close-ended, readers may hold strong opinions and be prepared to articulate them, challenging the official message. Hence, our evidence concurs with Baldwin-Philippi (2012), who identified and described emerging aspects of indirect and discreet control exercised by political campaigns on the Web, such as self-censorship, determining what participants will talk about (agenda-setting), focusing on winnable topics, and nonissue coverage.

Vaccari (2010) argues that Obama’s 2008 campaign use of innovative forms of political communication, such as *data-assisted guidance*, constituted a hybrid model of top-down control and bottom-up empowerment (while also noting the tensions that occasionally occur between the two). Yet, postmodern personalization and strategic segmentation are different from real empowerment and dialogue, especially when the outcome and substance of the campaign’s policies, issue responses, and overall discourse are entirely managed from the center. In other words, the fact that political advertising (because this is essentially what the Obama campaign’s Facebook posts constituted) is becoming much more sophisticated and rhetorically personalized does not make it any less strategic. On the contrary, it is precisely this unprecedented level of organization and discipline—translating into a highly integrated and strategic use of new media—that, according to previous studies, was vital to the Obama campaign’s success in 2008 (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). Although Facebook posts on the campaign’s official page may not be the ideal vehicle for microtargeted messages, the increasing sophistication, scope, and reach of Facebook’s personalization algorithm (see Gerodimos & Gray, 2013)—along with a strategic shift toward the integration of ads into the News Feed may soon allow that kind of campaigning to take place through Facebook, too.

Directing Facebook followers to spread the campaign’s message may signify an important change in terms of where and how political campaigning takes place, but it does not necessarily constitute a paradigm shift in terms of *truly interactive* communication between politicians and citizens. Having said that, even close-ended and strategic rhetoric, almost by definition, entails the agency of citizens, its success depending on the extent to which it can capture the moment and articulate issues, conflicts, or sociopolitical cleavages that are salient among the people (*kairos* and *stasis*, respectively; see Martin, 2013). In other words, political broadcasting requires an acute understanding of how citizens feel and what they need; listening is a prerequisite of successful strategic rhetoric.



1125 Furthermore, the *act* and *process* of engaging with a campaign may well have multiple benefits for a citizen's civic skills (such as political sophistication), social capital, and overall participation. In fact, Bode (2012) argues that, through interaction, conversation, and possible preference alteration, Facebook use may not just lead to civic skills but may also influence users. In that respect, future research should try to look at the effects and benefits of civic interaction on social media beyond the instances of communication itself.

1130 At this point, the limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Although our analysis captured every message posted in the two months before the 2012 election, this sample is still a partial snapshot in the context of a massive and multimedia campaign that had started several months before Election Day. Furthermore, due to the study's angle, we did not log or analyze the *content of comments* posted by followers on the campaign's various posts. Although such an undertaking would have certainly produced valuable insights regarding the quality, nature, and depth of civic deliberation among Obama's followers, it fell outside of this particular analysis's remit. The number of interactions each post received is a metric that can only provide tentative and indicative findings of what content people are more likely to engage with on Facebook. A broad range of elements will influence that process of engagement: users' personal attitude to politics and social media use, their habits in using social media (some never like, others always like), the temporal and geographical context around a particular message, the cultural and social context around the sent message, and the individual's situational context (mood, in a rush, personal bias). It is impossible to measure all of these on a large scale. However, significant associations were established, revealing—or rather, suggesting—a general tendency or inclination to engage more with particular themes or types of rhetoric. Although users exposed to published messages are in the first instance those who have liked (effectively subscribed to) Obama's official Facebook page, hence implying a Democrat inclination in a majority of the target audience, when an individual likes or shares a post, this becomes visible to

their networks, exposing other Facebook users to the published messages as well.

1175 Finally, as our intention was to look at merely what was “on the page” and how users engaged with that material at the basic level of using Facebook's features, we cannot make conclusive claims about the intentions of the campaign's communication strategists or, indeed, about any long-term effects on the followers or the externalities of the messages communicated through that page. Still, our analysis produced a rich body of data that provides us with important insights regarding both the 2012 Obama campaign itself and, more broadly, about emerging patterns of online political communication and engagement.

1180 Further qualitative research is needed into the motivations, meanings, and significance of a Facebook interaction (like/comment/share) to the platform's users. For example, does a “like” only express positive sentiments? How much affinity or endorsement is usually a prerequisite to liking content (merely superficial and impulsive response or significant and meaningful agreement)? And how does an individual decide what to share and what not to?

1190 Thinking more broadly in terms of the relationship between new media and political communication, our analysis of the 2012 Obama Facebook campaign revealed elements of both normalization (focus on candidate, underutilization of the medium's potential) and innovation (more positive tone, space for debate even if the discourse is close-ended). Despite noting that the claims of postmodern campaigning are overstated, Larsson (2013) argues that the potential for structural change rests with politicians *and* with citizens, because both sides have the resources to enforce change. As shown earlier, the Obama campaign's followers were quite selective in what types of messages they interacted with, largely overlooking promotional posts such as calls to action and celebrity endorsements, and engaging with character and family messages as well as policy statements, which would seem to go against fears of “dumbing down.”

1200 The question then arises: is the highly sophisticated, digitized, and personalized permanent campaign inherently at odds with a mode

of substantive citizen-politician communication and even coproduction of political ideas? Will it ever be possible—and is it even desirable—to combine the efficiency, highly strategic messages, centralized operations, and war-like mentality of political campaigning with substantive forms of civic interaction? Such civic input, if not necessarily shaping policy, could at least enhance both politicians’ understanding of the reality on the ground and citizens’ understanding of the complexities and constraints of contemporary policy making in a highly globalized, decentralized, and interdependent world. Such dialogue might have significant benefits for both sides, boosting empathy and systemic trust, even if politicians were to stand their ground (which might actually *enhance* their popular standing).

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### NOTE

1. Because the recording of posts only started on October 10, 2012, the samples were initially divided into two groups; post interactions from before October 10 (39 days) were recorded after the post had been published for a while. For example, a post from September 10 had a month of exposure when recorded while a post from October 1 merely had 10 days of exposure, potentially compromising the comparability of the number of interactions, because these accumulate over an indefinite period of time. Samples recorded after October 10 were consistently recorded every day. To counter this potential limitation, a preliminary analysis was carried out to establish if these two groups of posts could be compared. The number of interactions in every post gathered after October 10 was recorded repeatedly in the first five days after a post

was published to establish whether there was a saturation threshold after which interaction with the post diminished. The purpose of this was to ensure that the number of interactions in posts recorded more than five days after they were published could be compared to other posts. Our preliminary analysis showed that the number of new interactions receded considerably after the third day and almost ceded five days after a post was originally published, indicating that older posts coded after several days of exposure and newer posts coded consistently after five days constituted a homogeneous and workable sample.

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