



MEDIA@LSE
Department of **Media** and **Communications**

MEDIA@LSE Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

Compiled by Dr. Bart Cammaerts and Dr. Nick Anstead

Political Fandom in the Age of Social Media:

Case Study of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign

Komal H. Parikh,
MSc in Global Media & Communications

Other dissertations of the series are available online here:
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/mediaWorkingPapers/>

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2011, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Global Media & Communications Supervised by Dr. Shani Orgad.

Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

Copyright in editorial matter, LSE © 2012

Copyright, Komal H. Parikh © 2012.
The authors have asserted their moral rights.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher nor be issued to the public or circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. In the interests of providing a free flow of debate, views expressed in this dissertation are not necessarily those of the compilers or the LSE.

Political Fandom in the Age of Social Media: Case Study of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign

Komal H. Parikh

ABSTRACT

Barack Obama's use of social media in his 2008 Presidential Campaign has been widely acclaimed and written about. Simultaneously, Obama's ability to mobilize American youth not only energized his campaign, but ultimately became his strongest voting segment.

This study aimed to explore how youth voters used social media to build a non-traditional voter-politician relationship with Barack Obama, how political fandom manifested itself during the campaign, and what this new, mediated relationship between politicians and voters could imply for the future of politics. The study drew primarily from Henry Jenkins' discussion on fandom as well as Liesbet van Zoonen's research on the convergence of entertainment and politics.

Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with American youth who voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 election. Most respondents revealed that a candidate's persona—including his charisma, character, ability to communicate and values—was one of the important factors in their voting decision. Respondents consistently used social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to form an overall understanding of candidates, express personal opinions, display allegiance and actively support the campaign. Based on the information gleaned from the interviews, respondents' behavior and attitude towards Obama aligned with Jenkins' (1992) five levels of fandom. Furthermore, respondents openly claimed to be fans of Obama during the campaign.

The study revealed that similar to how fan communities use social media to follow and participate in discussion around sports, television programs, film, and celebrities, political fan communities are using social media in the same capacity. Social media has allowed for greater transparency in the relationship between voters and politicians. Though some critics claim that a fan-celebrity relationship between voters and politicians may de-legitimize the democratic process, this study shows that in fact, this new, mediated relationship has allowed youth to become more engaged in politics.

INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States. His win can be attributed to many factors. On one hand, many Americans were dissatisfied with Republican President George W. Bush. According to a Gallup Poll, Bush's approval ratings dropped to 29% only seven months prior to the 2008 election (Newport, 2008). More Republicans chose to vote for Barack Obama, a Democrat, than Democrats chose to vote for Republican candidate John McCain ("Candidate Support," n.d.). Additionally, some reports show that John McCain's choice of vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin, may have cost McCain the presidential win ("Did Palin Cost McCain," 2011). Others claim that Obama's ability to energize and mobilize the youth vote helped him win the election (Dahl, 2008; Drehle, 2008).

To capture the youth vote—consisting of voters between the ages of 18-29—is no easy feat and are a segment often ignored by politicians (Keeter, Horowitz & Tyson, 2008; New Voters Project, n.d.). However, according to The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 23 million youth voted in the 2008 presidential election, an increase from the 2004 election, of which 66% voted for Barack Obama (Keeter, Horowitz & Tyson, 2008; "Rock the Vote," 2008; "Turnout by Education," 2008).

A study by PR firm Edelman attributes Obama's 'landslide victory' primarily to his successful use of social media (Lutz, 2009). But what exactly is social media and how does it differ from social networking sites (SNS)? Social network sites, which include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, and YouTube, are defined by Boyd & Ellison (2007) as web-based services enabling individuals to:

- (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
- (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection
- (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

According to this definition, Boyd & Ellison (2007) state that one of the earliest social network sites (SNS), sixdegrees.com, was launched in 1997. It was not until the launch of Friendster and MySpace that SNS went mainstream (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media on the other hand, as discussed by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) was coined at the intersection of high-speed internet and the formation of SNS such as MySpace and Facebook. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media encompasses Web 2.0 applications, technology that allows for user-collaboration as well as User Generated Content (USG) which focuses on individual participation and content creation on Web 2.0 applications. For Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media includes: blogs, SNS (such as Facebook and Twitter), content

communities (such as YouTube), collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia), virtual social worlds (such as Second Life), and virtual game worlds (such as World of Warcraft). This study, will use Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media with sole focus on blogs, SNS, and content communities.

Social media had been used by presidential candidates prior to 2008. Presidential candidate Howard Dean's use of the Internet and SNS in the 2004 election was groundbreaking and formed a grassroots following, particularly among youth voters, who referred to themselves as 'Deaniacs' ("Come Back," 2004; Rich, 2003). However, social media was in a very different place in 2008 than it had been in the 2004 presidential election. Facebook alone grew from 1 million active users by end of December 2004 to 90 million users by July 2008 (Smith, 2008).

During the 2008 election, not only were more people using social media, but Barack Obama's presence on social media far exceeded his opponents. His campaign saw a dynamic surge of voter involvement on social media, from voters posting comments on Facebook to uploading videos on YouTube to writing blogs (Lutz, 2009). A fan community began to evolve around Barack Obama's campaign. Celebrities openly endorsed Obama and created videos in support of his campaign. Obama in turn appeared to resemble a celebrity through his appearances on talk shows and comedy sketches, clips of which re-circulated on YouTube and blogs. Has evolving platforms of social media changed voter's interaction? Were politics generating fans communities similar to traditional fan communities surrounding sports teams and popular films? If so, then how did political fan communities compare and contrast to traditional fan communities? Was there a fundamental change taking place between voters and politicians?

This work is keen to move beyond a top-down approach as employed by many scholars and observers—who seek to study how Obama successfully employed social media—and rather explore the relationship youth voters developed with Obama at the grassroots level through social media, how they engaged with him through social media and how a political fan culture emerged. This study also seeks to predict how these changes in voter behavior and what evolving technologies could imply for the future of politics.

Theoretical Chapter

Media Convergence, Participatory Culture and Fandom

The idea of 'convergence', first introduced by Ithiel de Sola Pool in 1983, has opened the door to many discussions on media convergence within the past two decades. Henry Jenkins, who has written numerous books and articles on the evolving meaning of convergence, defines it as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences..." (2006a, p. 2). Jenkins definition highlights three, inter-connected aspects of convergence: 1.) media platforms, 2.) media industries, and 3.) media audiences.

Jenkins (2006a) counters contemporary discussions around what he calls the 'Black Box Fallacy' (p.14) which suggests that media platforms will merge into a single device. Rather, he believes that media ownership is allowing conglomerates, such as Viacom and The Walt Disney Company, to expand their media portfolio to venture into multiple industries including radio, theater, production, online media, publishing, and theme parks. Using music as an example he writes, "you can listen to the Dixie Chicks through your DVD player, your car radio, your walkman, your iPod, a Web radio station, or a music cable channel" (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 16). These changes by the media industry both reflect and affect media audiences and their preferences. Jenkins (2006a) observes that convergence is not simply a process bringing various media functions together, but also represents a cultural shift among consumers who strive to uncover new information and form connections with media content. Most importantly, media audiences are no longer passive spectators but rather empowered participants in the process.

The change taking place in audience participation have been noted by many academics. A decade before Jenkins, William A. Gamson (1992) has described this change as 'collective agency'. Gamson (1992) defines collective agency as a rebellion against forces of cultural and social structures striving to "induce collective helplessness" (p. 59). And even prior to Gamson, Pierre Levy (2001) coined the term, 'collective intelligence', which he believes is the ability of individuals to be free of geographical constraints and limitations and allows communities to develop and expand productively. However, the changes taking place in audience participation are continuously evolving. More recently, Jenkins (2006b) continues the conversation of his predecessors by describing a new trend in which digital transformation in modern technologies and economic trends advance the flow of "images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels, demanding more active modes of

spectatorship” (p. 135-136). Jenkins argues that we live in a ‘participatory culture’: a culture with “low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations...in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (Jenkins, et al., 2006, p. 3).

Jenkins believes that participatory culture is the starting point for the emergence of various subcultures one of which are fan communities. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) speaks of fandom as a defensible position, one which has long been associated with negative stereotypes and fanatic behavior, a sentiment he strives to remedy. However, his writings are limited to discussion of fan communities associated with TV series and films such as Star Trek, and do not take into account fan communities that have emerged in contemporary popular culture.

While Jenkins (1992) discusses fandom as a sub-culture of audience participation, Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) describe fandom as the first of three categories in a continuum of audience involvement: 1.) Fans 2.) Cultists and 3.) Enthusiasts. Fans are individuals who become attached to certain stars or programs; cultists are organized, collective groups of individual fans that meet and create networks; and enthusiasts are less interested in actual media or stars but rather the activities that encompass these groups (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). For Jenkins (1992), individual agency and collective participation are all encompassed within fan culture while Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998) separate these attributes throughout three categories. According to Jenkins (1992) fandom consists of five levels of activities:

- 1.) Fandom involves a particular mode of reception. They translate the reception process into social interaction with other fans. So, making meanings involves sharing, enunciating, and debating meanings.
- 2.) Fandom involves a particular set of critical and interpretative practices. They create strong parallels between their own lives and the events of the series
- 3.) Fandom involves a base for consumer activism. Fans are viewers who speak back to the networks and the producers, who assert their right to make judgements and to express opinions about the development of favorite programs.
- 4.) Fandom possess particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices. Fan artists create artwork to share with other fan friends. It is about common enthusiasms and interests; interdependence vs. self-interests; collectivism vs. individualism; with an emphasis on loyalty, identity and belonging.
- 5.) Fandom functions as a social community. The ability to offer symbolic solutions to real world problems and felt needs. It is a refuge from drudgery and constraint and opens us to imagined possibilities. (p. 284)

These levels of fandom can be observed in Burwell & Boler's 2008 research on fandom on news satire shows, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*. In their simple search on Google Blog of the phrase 'the daily show' they came across more than three-hundred thousand hits (Burwell & Boler, 2008). The study discusses a particular segment of *The Colbert Report* where host Stephen Colbert requests his fans to vote for him in a contest to name a bridge in Hungary after himself (Burwell & Boler, 2008). Stephen Colbert received 17 million votes to name the bridge, more than than the population of Hungary itself (Burwell & Boler, 2008).

This incredible level of fan involvement in popular culture and its implications as it relates to politics have been greatly debated over the past couple of decades which are discussed in the next section.

Politics and Popular Culture

John Street (2001) observes that in news and current affairs, politics is treated with reverence and politicians legitimized as influential political actors. However, politics and consequently politicians are ridiculed in popular culture and depicted to show lack of intelligence and a moral compass (Street, 2001). Essentially, Street (2003) argues that popular culture, which he considers to be mass-produced, low-culture compared to the more cerebral high-culture such as opera, de-legitimizes politics into a mere product and political communication into 'show-business'. He states that Bill Clinton's appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, where he played the saxophone, reflected Clinton's careful study of performers to create an emotional connection with the audience (Street, 1997). Street (1997) claims that politicians "associate themselves with popular culture and its icons, in the hope that some of the popularity will rub off" (p. 48).

However, Margaret Scammell (1999) argues that the creation of a political image is essential for candidates that want to be taken seriously in the political market. A sentiment similarly expressed by Richard Nixon's speechwriter who stated that a politicians image is what matters most, even more than the man himself (as cited in Street, 1997). Scammell (2003) believes that this shift can be attributed to digital changes and is fundamentally transforming the citizen into a consumer in political campaigning. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) shares this sentiment. She disagrees with scholars such as Corner & Pels (2003) who criticize politics as an institution which is becoming more of a spectacle. Instead, she argues that politics must peak the interests of the average citizen and communicate according to the culture of the time. van Zoonen (2005) believes that rather than focusing on erasing entertainment from

politics, one should ask how to entertain the citizen to develop political citizenship. Perhaps reflected best by a conversation between Kelvin McKenzie, former editor of the *The Sun*, a popular British newspaper, and his political editor in which McKenzie reportedly stated, “Forget all this crap about politicians—who’s interested, eh? The readers don’t [care] about politicians...why don’t you get a story for them, eh? One with people they’ve heard of for a change?” (as cited in Street, 2001, p. 61-62). This statement resonates with van Zoonen’s sentiments about the need to entertain the citizen to evoke political citizenship.

As many politicians have begun to embrace this trend, critics discuss the rise of ‘celebrity politicians.’ P. David Marshall (1997) argues that “in politics, a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people, and the state. In the realm of entertainment, a celebrity must somehow embody the sentiments of an audience” (p. 203). The merging of the roles among celebrities and politicians, van Zoonen (2005) notes, has been loathed by many critics. At the same token, she states that politicians are now undertaking the role of a celebrity as their private lives become more public, citing former U.S. President Bill Clinton who stated, “If an actor can become a president, a president can be an actor” (as cited in van Zoonen, 2005, p. 74). Street (2001) argues that politicians, like pop and film stars, are now commodities. But popular culture influences are not only turning politicians into celebrities, but changing the nature of citizens as well.

Scholars continue to debate the defining qualities of citizens, politicians and politics. For Scammell (2003), the citizen is a consumer and politics is a market-place, while for Street (1997), citizens are media audiences. Street (1997) writes, “politics, like popular culture is about creating an ‘audience’...both the popular media and politicians are engaged in creating works of popular fiction which portray credible worlds that resonate with people’s experiences” (p. 60). van Zoonen (2005), like Street, draws parallels between popular culture and political audiences; however, she discusses these influence with the emergence of political fan communities. van Zoonen (2005) states that political fan communities, like popular culture communities, can be both short- and long-lived, but that the significant overlap between fan communities in both genres is the “emotional constitution of electorates that involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates and parties” (p. 66). van Zoonen (2005) discusses that critics such as Weber, among others, have criticized the inclusion of emotion in politics as something which undermines the political process. Yet, more contemporary scholars argue that emotion is good for citizenship because it is our emotion which facilitates the use of our reason (van Zoonen, 2005).

But how are such strong emotional connections between politicians and voters developed? The next section outlines the extent Barack Obama employed social networks to create an emotional connection with his constituents.

Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign: Social Media and Youth Mobilization

Manuel Castells (2000) states in *The Rise of the Network Society* that, "The ability or inability of societies to master technology, and particularly technologies that are strategically decisive in each historical period, largely shapes their destiny" (p. 7). Barack Obama has been lauded by numerous observers, both academic and non-academic, to have mastered the use of new media, particularly social media, in his 2008 presidential campaign. What changes in the media environment allowed for this?

Sabato (2010) writes that in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election, the Internet not only "became fully institutionalized as a media platform, but also the range of online applications expanded" (p. 187). Between the 2004 election and the 2008 election, the number of people who used the Internet as a major source of information tripled (Sabato, 2010). Furthermore, social media became a dominant force during the election, particularly sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Fisher, 2009). Castells (2009) research showed that one in three users of the Internet had a profile on a social networking site during the election. Though all the presidential candidates, including John McCain and Hillary Clinton, leveraged social networking sites in their campaigns, Obama's campaign "did everything incrementally better than its competitors" (Lutz, 2009). Obama had 5 million supporters throughout 15 different social networking sites (Lutz, 2009). By election day in November 2008, Obama had almost 3 million Facebook fans, four times his opponent McCain and twenty-three times the number of Twitter followers than McCain (Vargas, 2008). Fourteen million man-hours were spent watching Obama-related videos on YouTube (Vargas, 2008). Obama even created his own social media website, Mybarackobama.com, or MyBO, which had 2 million user created profiles (Vargas, 2008). Users could donate to the campaign, match another user's first-time donation, leave blog posts, and create volunteer groups through the site (Harfoush, 2009). Obama also used the MyBO site to mobilize his supporters to volunteer on his behalf in the comfort of their own home by making phone calls to rally other supporters or to fight attacks against Obama through his website 'FighttheSmears' (Harfoush, 2009). According to Rahaf Harfoush (2009), a volunteer on Barack Obama's campaign and who also wrote the book, *Yes We Did: An inside look at how social media built the Obama brand*,

Obama's goal was to create meaningful relationships with his supporters and empower them with tools to engage with him, his campaign and participate in the democratic process.

Social networks were not the only game-changer. According to exit polls, 66% of those under the age of 30 voted for Barack Obama (Keeter, Horowitz, & Tyson, 2008). Even TIME Magazine referred to 2008 as the 'Year of Youth' (Drehle, 2008). The article states that next to the closest competitor, youth preferred Obama 4 to 1 (Drehle, 2008). The youth segment, often the most reluctant to participate in politics, gave Obama a boost of 17,000 votes (Drehle, 2008). The article dubbed youth the "muscle of Obama's army" (Drehle, 2008).

Conceptual Framework & Research Question

The theoretical chapter explores multiple ideas debated by academics and observers including the influence media convergence has had on the evolution of participatory culture and consequently the subculture of fan communities. Also discussed is the collision of popular culture and politics with simultaneous changes in online media technology, particularly the revolution of social media. Finally, the chapter explored how many of these factors surfaced in Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign.

The theoretical chapter reveals that the term 'citizen' is becoming synonymous with words such as consumer and fan. The word 'consumer' takes on more of a marketing approach as studied by academics such as John Street and Margaret Scammell, while the word 'fan' is used mostly in reference to popular culture and entertainment, as studied by Henry Jenkins and Liesbet van Zoonen. My decision is to explore the latter. This research is strongly framed by Henry Jenkins works (1992, 2006b) on fandom in popular culture in which he acknowledges that online media technologies have lowered barrier to entry, providing consumers with agency to create and disseminate cultural meaning and has resulted in like-minded individuals forming shared communities. This research hopes to take Jenkins description of fandom and apply it to the realm of politics to discuss the emergence of political fandom and the form it has taken in the realm of new online technologies such as social media.

Where Street takes a top-down approach in understanding politicians and the effects popular culture has in political communication by framing this change as 'low-culture', I hope to take a bottom-up approach as introduced by van Zoonen, focusing more on fan communities in politics as a reflection of changing citizen preferences. Essentially, rather than discussing how political campaigns are strategically using political communication to position

politicians as celebrities, I hope to understand the relationship voters are forming with politicians and how this is informed by social media and whether this relationship can be compared to Jenkins (1992) levels of fandom as stated on page 5.

The effects of social media on political fandom have been scarcely discussed. Jenkins discussion on fandom revolves primarily around traditional media such as television and film. Though, van Zoonen does discuss online political fandom, most of her research is prior to 2005 and does not reflect the popularity in social media in the past six years. Hence, I would like to specifically look at the role social media has played in the further development of political fan communities.

This idea of political fandom will be studied through the lens of Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign. Much has already been written and debated about Barack Obama's political brand, his marketing tactics and revolutionary use of social media. Instead, this research will not focus on Barack Obama specifically, nor does it hope to answer the question of *how* Barack Obama won, but rather examine the *mediated relationship* between voters and Barack Obama. As it is difficult within the parameters of a MSc dissertation to fully explore a dynamic population such as the American voter, I have chosen to limit my research to the youth voter, as this group according to 2008 Pew Research was one of the largest voter segments for Obama.

Ultimately, the objective of this research is to answer a two-part question:

- 1.) What did youth voters use of social media to interact with Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign reveal about the new dimensions of political fandom in the United States?
- 2.) How does this inform the changing mediated relationship between voters and politicians?

My hope is that by looking at political fandom from a social media and youth perspective, I will be able to add a new perspective to a discussion on Barack Obama's 2008 election that will deviate from his much discussed his marketing approach, as well as meaningfully contribute to the conversation already begun by Jenkins and van Zoonen on political fandom.

Methodology

Qualitative Interviews

Eight qualitative interviews were conducted for this study. A qualitative interview method was considered to be the best method for my research because according to Bauer & Gaskell (2000): “The qualitative interview provides the basic data for the development of an understanding of the relations between social actors and their situation. The objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviors of people in particular social contexts” (p. 39). This sentiment aligns with the objective of my research, which is to understand the behavior, motivations and personal experiences of American voters. Thus, to extract the depth and richness of information needed to achieve this objective, it was believed that a qualitative approach would be best.

A survey method was not chosen because an interview would allow for more flexibility in asking follow-up questions. Additionally, I am not interested in quantifying or aggregating information from voters, but rather peeling back layers of complex decision-making processes, which would be most feasible with a qualitative interview.

I preferred to conduct individual interviews rather than group interviews because I am interested in understanding how and to what extent voters internalized their association with Barack Obama. The decision was informed by Holstein and Gubrium (1997) who state that, “Ideally, the interview should be conducted in private. This helps assure that respondents will speak directly from their vessels of answers, not in response to the presence of others” (p. 118). I was hesitant that group interviews would bias answers by not allowing individual reflection and instead, respondents would be persuaded by the answers of fellow interviewees. Since my research aims to unravel political fandom, an idea that has not yet become a mainstream term in political discussion, I felt that voters may not realize their own fandom behavior and could best be revealed by an in-depth, individual interview rather than a group interview or even a survey (Berger, 1998).

Specifically, a ‘reflexive dyadic interviewing approach’, as discussed by Ellis & Berger (2003) was used. This approach allows for more intimate interaction between interviewer and interviewee in which the interviewer also “shares personal experience with the topic at hand or reflects on the communicative process of the interview. The interaction is conducted more as a conversation between two equals than as a distinctly, hierarchical, question-and-answer exchange...” (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 472). Politics can be a personal, often private, subject.

For many, true sentiments on issues close to one's heart, besides simple political party affiliations, are only shared with family and friends. Taking this into account, I believe that the reflexive dyadic interview approach would create a more intimate setting in which the interviewee would feel comfortable to share personal opinions.

Sampling

As stated by the research question, the study observes fandom behavior in American youth voters, specifically those who voted for Barack Obama in 2008. I sent a Facebook message to 32 peers who were a.) American citizens, b.) eligible to vote in the 2008 Presidential Election, c.) under the age of 29 at the time of the 2008 election and d.) in geographical proximity to the interviewer.

The Facebook message requested individuals to respond if they had voted for Barack Obama in 2008, had engaged with him or his campaign using social media, and were interested in being interviewed about their experience and motivations. Fifteen individuals responded to the message of which eight interviewees were selected based on time availability of the respondents and time constraint of the research. Upon completion of the interviews, there was sufficient depth of information collected for the study and further interviews were not pursued.

Though choosing a mixed sample based on respondent's level of political involvement was initially considered—choosing a sample that reflected low, middle, and high involvement—it was ultimately deemed arbitrary to the research question which is framed to understand voters' personal motivations, attitude, and behavior towards Obama and his campaign, regardless of level of political involvement. Additionally, gender was also considered to be an arbitrary variable to account for in relation to the research question and was not considered when choosing the interviewees.

Design of Interview

The interview was semi-structured, which allowed for open-ended discussion, but also covered pre-determined themes by the interviewer as related to the research question. The topic guide included the following sections:

- Introduction, Confidentiality and Consent Form
- Interviewee's personal political background
- Interviewee and social media
- Interviewee and Barack Obama
- Interviewee's opinion about the future of social media and politics

Interviews were conducted in a private study room in the main library at the London School of Economics and Political Science, away from major distractions. Participants were informed that the interview would be taped, transcribed, and that the information would remain confidential and not identify them personally. Respondents were informed that they could stop the interview at any time and ask for clarification whenever needed. These points were also outlined in the Participant Consent Form. The interview commenced once participants understood the purpose of the study and signed the consent form. Interviews spanned over two weeks and each interview ranged between 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded using my personal computer and then transcribed by the interviewer.

The free-flow conversation approach allowed respondents to ease into the interview and open-up during difficult questions. The discussion was centered around the respondent's own experience and interaction with social media, Barack Obama and fandom. As one of the aims of this study was to understand the exhibition of political fan behavior, the concept of fandom was not mentioned in the Facebook message sent to potential interviewees nor was it mentioned in the introduction prior to the interview. This was done to ensure that respondents would answer questions organically without pre-determined notions of political fandom.

At the end of each interview, respondents were asked their opinion about the future of politics in relation to changes in media technology as well as discuss any other opinions they may have had on the subject that was not asked in the interview. This enabled the production of greater insights and experiences than would have been possible with a more structured interview format.

Limitations

All interviewees were American, post-graduate students studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The financial ability to study abroad and the intellectual capacity to be a student in a graduate program cannot be generalized of the American youth voting population and may have skewed the information collected in the interview.

Of the eight interviewees, six were media majors and two were comparative politics majors. These areas align with the research at hand. The interviewees knowledge, previous study, and immersion within these subject areas could have also skewed the data.

Analysis & Findings

Persona vs. Policy

Though all respondents voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election, only two of the eight interviewees supported him from the beginning of his candidacy. Barack Obama's relative political inexperience compared to other candidates was the main reason stated by all respondents who did not initially support him. Instead, these respondents were split between support for Democratic candidates Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Republican candidate John McCain. Respondents' final decision to vote for Obama differed and was multi-fold. For some of the respondent's such as James, Stacy and Lisa, McCain's choice of keeping Sarah Palin as the Vice-Presidential running mate, whom they disliked, became a key deciding factor. For Meredith, Andrea and Anthony it was primarily a dissatisfaction and frustration with the old administration under George W. Bush that made them eventually gravitate towards preferring a younger, fresher candidate which they saw in Barack Obama. As Anthony describes:

I think that maybe in my mind there are two factors more than anything else. One being a frustration with the Bush administration, and a feeling of hopelessness, and an inability to do anything...So there is that and just that [Barack Obama] was a charismatic person that people liked, you know? Charismatic in the sense that people could relate to him and were inspired by his story.

It is Anthony's latter comment, about Barack Obama's charisma and personality, that was a common denominator expressed by all respondents. Barack Obama was described as charismatic, relatable, a stand-up guy, a family-man, classy, a leader, dignified, moral, rational, a gentleman and intelligent. These characteristics were gleaned from what respondents saw, read, and heard and ultimately drove them to vote for Barack Obama.

When asked what she looked for in a presidential candidate, Tammy stated:

Charisma. I feel like the way they interact with people, I can just see that they are genuinely interested in who they are talking to. And that charisma just comes off. A people person. That's what gets my attention. With Bush, I couldn't relate to him. But with Obama it's different. I feel like I can relate to him on another level. He had a good sense of humor but he was also a gentleman.

Stacy also stated:

It's not just the issues, but how they communicate the issues. Kind of the conviction they have. How they interact with people in the media and carry themselves. I guess a lot of it is the charisma they have and the persona. They are the face of the country. I think Barack Obama embodied those characteristics. Aside from my not wanting Palin as Vice President, it was these qualities Obama possessed that made me vote for him. He actually seemed like he was wanting to make change. He was so passionate about trying to empower change, do things differently and really get to the bottom of what some of the old issues were.

Meredith, who grew up in Chicago, IL, knew about Barack Obama long before many other Americans as he was her State Senator since 2004. She remembered hearing positive stories about Obama being a 'stand-up guy,' which made her more interested in him when he chose to run for office in the 2008 election. It was ultimately his positive character which she perceived through the media that made her an Obama supporter. According to Meredith:

I was accused of being shallow and naive because I was basically voting on the basis of character instead of voting history. But I think, even in retrospect, those were legitimate reasons. Because it was not just his charm, but his whole sense of being was consistent. So not just his image, but the character under that image which was really important...I would say that the non-political part of Obama has been my main interest. I feel like even if he votes 100% the way I would vote in the same situation, I don't know, I would still need to see a noble core back it up. So I am actually interested in what he believes in to see if he can lead a country.

For James, Obama was not his first choice and he believed that both Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden had more experience. Nevertheless, he found Obama to be 'fresher' and better able to connect with people, something he thought the other politicians lacked. Andrea also expressed similar sentiments, stating that it was not about the issues for her, but more about the 'likeability factor', which she found in Obama. Saleem described Obama as possessing a 'presidential presence,' which he defined as a combination of charisma, intelligence and leadership, that he was unable to see in the other candidates.

Furthermore, many of the respondents read the books written by Barack Obama prior to his taking office, including *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. For Tammy, reading about his life journey not only made him appear more human and tangible, but helped her find relate to him by finding parallels between her life and his.

Over half of the respondents expressed seeking out more personal information about the candidate as the election progress instead of seeking out more information about his voting record or his policy platform. In fact, none of the respondents stated that a candidate's policy platform or voting record was a primary determinant in their decision-making process.

Nevertheless, not all respondents acknowledged Obama's charisma and personality to be a factor in their voting decision. To Lisa, Obama seemed like a great guy and a good politician, but she was not swayed like some of her friends on his message of 'Hope' and 'Change.' Though she voted for him in the end, she wished his policy platform had been stronger and more firm. Anthony was worried that his friends were becoming too emotionally invested in Obama based on charisma alone and that their expectations were set too high.

The findings suggest that though many factors played a role in respondents' decision-making process of which candidate to support, a politician's persona—including his charisma, character and ability to communicate to his constituents—was an important factor, and for most the key factor in their final decision. Obama's policy platform was a secondary factor and often overshadowed by his persona. This persona for respondents juxtaposed George W. Bush as well as Republican candidates such as John McCain and Sarah Palin who represented traditional, older politics for the respondents which they saw in a negative light. In contrast, Barack Obama was more human, relatable, and tangible because they found his personality comparable to their own.

But to what extent did respondents connect with Barack Obama's persona?

Politics and Popular Culture

Most of the respondents believed that Barack Obama had reached a celebrity status. Their conviction was based on multiple observations. They saw an internal parallel between how they perceived and interacted with celebrities (e.g. actors and musicians) and how they interacted with Barack Obama. Andrea saw herself being interested in what Michelle Obama was wearing and what school her kids attended. She knew these to be irrelevant to Barack Obama's potential role as president, but was nonetheless intrigued and sought out this information. According to her:

Right now in our society, celebrity is everything and is kind of inevitable. Maybe in the future, people won't be so interested in celebrities and politicians as celebrities, but right now, it definitely is a craze.

Lisa also observed similar tendencies in herself and amongst her friends, but felt that often the tabloids focused too much on superficial elements such as Bristol Palin's (Sarah Palin's daughter) chin job and reporting politicians' private and personal details.

Respondents also observed an external parallel between celebrities and presidential candidates appearing on popular television programs such as talk shows and comedy sketches. Saleem, an avid viewer of *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, stated that he appreciated when politicians appeared on these shows, a platform he knows is often used by celebrities. He states:

I like it as a politically active person as well as your average citizen because it gives me a viewpoint of the politician that I would not usually get. It's a little less filtered. I think it's a great way to see the person and not just the political figure. It is making them more transparent and revealing who they are. Plus, it's a great campaign move.

Saleem along with James, Anthony, Andrea and Lisa also referred to the Kennedy-Nixon election during the interview, suggesting that image and media have been linked for some time. According to Saleem:

I think political celebrity has always existed. I mean, people like to say this for Nixon and Kennedy. It was the first presidential debate that was televised. People who heard it on the radio say that Nixon won, hands down. He was the better speaker, had strong rebuttals, very to the point. There's a poll that shows this dramatically. If you heard them on the radio, Nixon won. If you saw it on TV, Kennedy won. Everyone says this. Nixon looked mean. He looked unkept. He didn't look presidential.

James believes that the introduction of television elevated the importance of the image and personality of candidates, and the introduction of the internet age has increased this trend. He shares his perspective:

Websites are open 24 hours, seven days a week, and they need to fill that. They have to keep people interested and entertained. Because, if they aren't going to do it, someone else will. And, news is great, but it's a business at the end of the day, isn't it? So they have to sell. So politicians, like celebrities, also have Twitter accounts and websites and are followed all the time. I think it's a winning formula for politicians, because if you aren't talking to someone, somebody else is.

James also reflected that his own friends were more interested in celebrities than politicians, so understood why politicians try to turn themselves into celebrities. But he sees it as a double-edged sword. He recalls a commercial by a Republican opponent that showed famous celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, followed by Barack Obama. He found that this commercial slightly hurt his personal view of Barack Obama because it almost seemed like Obama was so popular that he did not have any substance.

For Tammy, Andrea and Stacy though, it was the entertainment and celebrity factor that got them interested in Barack Obama. It became a ripple effect for them. The talk shows, blogs,

comedy sketches and personal interest stories attracted them to learn more about Barack Obama which then got them interested in political issues. They revealed that they are more active in politics today as a result of the accessibility of political information online.

The findings suggest that first, politicians are gaining greater exposure on televised programs, traditionally held for celebrities and, second, that voters are engaging with politicians in the same way they do with celebrities. Most respondents felt that appearing on these programs was a great way for them to learn more about the candidate and an inevitable political move in today's celebrity-fascinated environment. These sentiments mirror Liesbet van Zoonen's (2005) discussion that politicians must connect to citizens according to the culture of the time. Though many of the respondents realized that there can be negative consequences to elevating and interacting with a politician as a celebrity, they considered it a great political move and a better way to reach out to a demographic that is not normally very politically active. They are naturally interested in celebrities and learn more about politics and politicians when they brand themselves in a similar fashion. Respondents also expressed that the level of celebrity-status Obama had achieved during the campaign has declined since the election. However, for many, it was through their engagement with online media.

What role did social media play in this phenomenon between voters and Obama?

Social Media and Politics

Of all media sources used by respondents to stay informed during the campaign, new media sources were the prime source of information, of which social media was a significant platform mentioned, particularly Facebook, blogs, and YouTube.

Facebook was used most frequently by respondents on a day-to-day basis; however, it was not considered to be a great source to get quality information during the campaign. If video clips were uploaded by friends, respondents found themselves clicking on the links and watching the clips. To them, Facebook was more about expressing allegiance than learning about the facts of the campaign. Primarily, social networks such as Facebook were used to see recommendations posted by friends of interesting blogs, videos and articles. According to Meredith:

I would say Facebook keeps you in touch with the zeitgeist and with what everyone is talking about. I feel there is a buzz around a certain topic if people keep posting about it. So, it's not the quality of information but the notion that if the quantity is there, which it was, then it is an important thing to keep discussing. I think Barack Obama did this well. He had his finger on the pulse of something that was very common and related to everyone. He had his finger on

the pulse of technology and in turn he was quite connected to what people thought and felt.

In contrast, respondents stated that blogs and YouTube were the main sources of social media which provided them information to make decisions. Tammy shares:

I followed him on Twitter, but I felt like someone was writing for him. So I didn't feel like Twitter really connected me to Obama. But I turned to blogs, which had clips people would upload of him. One recently came out where Obama is holding a baby and Michelle couldn't quiet him down. But then Obama picks her up and she becomes quiet. And I'm like, yes, I love it! Throughout the campaign, I would constantly look up videos of him and Michelle. It was through him and the videos that I started liking Michelle too. It was really the blogs that caught my attention and is what I remember. I mean I can't remember a particular newscast. It's not even in my memory bank. But I remember the videos and the blogs, and that's what stands out to me.

For James, who was working in Israel during the campaign and election, social media played a critical role in keeping him informed and updated.

I wasn't able to watch C-Span or watch long broadcasts online or talk to people individually where I was. So my sole interaction with Obama and the campaign was through social media.

Anthony was not only a member of MyBO.com, Barack Obama's own social networking site, but used the site features to become more politically active. He recalled getting together with close friends who would then use the calling lists provided on the website to call potential voters and share their views of Obama as a candidate to encourage them to visit the polls on election day. In the process, he made professional contacts throughout the nation. He felt social media allowed him easy access to the campaign from the comfort of his home and be a part of something special.

For Meredith, blogs helped her paint a picture of the characteristics of politicians. She recalls something she read on the blog, *Gawker*:

Meredith: I read on *Gawker* that McCain was shouting at his wife Cindy in private and really disrespecting her and they were just together for the moment that he was running. That really contrasts with the way Obama adores Michelle...

Me: Where did you hear about Obama adoring Michelle?

Meredith: I think *Gawker* as well. It was from a source that said that Barack Obama adores Michelle. And in my head that made sense because it is obvious that they are intelligent people.

It was through blogs that Meredith was able to build a picture of McCain and Obama and helped her make her final voting decision. However, while some respondents like Meredith used social media to build a character profile of candidates, Saleem stated that for him, social media was more about entertainment than political activism. Furthermore, some respondents expressed a negative side to social media and politics. Though Anthony agrees

that there is an intrinsic good in having more people hands-on with politics, as enabled by social media, he believes that there can be negative side effects in experiencing politics in a very mediated way. He believes that information is becoming less objective as it is now easy to stay in a political bubble. Using Facebook as an example, he states that because most of his friends are Democrats, his Facebook Newsfeed exposes him primarily to one-sided views. Furthermore, he expresses his discomfort with social media companies that are more interested in creating algorithms that memorize his online behavior and show him sites and comments that only align with his interests. In politics, he believes this does allow for meaningful exposure, conversation, or involvement.

The findings suggest that social media was heavily used by respondents during the election; however, different social media sites served different purposes. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook were mostly used to display allegiance to a candidate or vent frustrations about opponents. These tools served more as a launching pad, as respondents would click on videos or articles that friends uploaded on their pages. Blogs were used by respondents to paint a fuller picture of candidates, learning about their families, speeches they had given, gossip news, and entertainment shows on which candidates had appeared. Though respondents still relied on other media platforms other than social media to stay informed (e.g. online newspaper articles and Television programs), the main factor of understanding a politician's personality was more affectively perceived through social media such as blogs and video clips than any other media format. Respondents used multiple sources and sites to build a complete picture of a candidate, as various social media platforms offered something different. Furthermore, respondents expressed that Barack Obama's use of social media allowed them to connect with him and his campaign in a way that they had not been able to with other candidates. As a result, social media not only exposed them to politics, but helped them build an affinity towards politics that extended beyond the 2008 election.

Political Fandom

When respondents were asked what they defined as a fan, they typically defined a fan as an individual who passionately supported someone or something. All respondents but one stated that they considered themselves fans of Barack Obama at the time of the election, even though not all claimed to have those same sentiments thereafter.

According to Jenkins (1992, p. 284), fandom encompasses five levels of activity: (1.) Social interaction with other fans and making and sharing meaning; (2.) Creating strong parallels between their lives and events; (3.) Initiating consumer activism and express opinions; (4.)

Possessing forms of cultural production in a collective environment; (5.) Functioning as a social community and as a refuge from constraint which opens one to imagined possibilities.

These fan attributes were expressed by respondents for not only sports teams, celebrities and films, but also for political candidates, particularly Barack Obama.

(1.) Social interaction with other fans and making and sharing meaning

Lisa shared that though she was initially a Hillary supporter, it was her boyfriend, a passionate Barack Obama supporter, that persuaded her to attend the Obama rallies on their university campus. It was at these rallies that she interacted with other Obama supporters which peaked her interest in learning more about him. She describes a typical rally:

We would go hang out, yell and scream, and then somebody from the campaign headquarters would say something, and then we would go to the bar and hangout.

She revealed that this interaction with other supporters and close friends not only made her vote for Obama but got her more interested in politics.

(2.) Creating strong parallels between their lives and events

For some respondents, they developed an emotional connection with Obama. Meredith shares how she feels the presidency has taken a toll on Barack Obama since the election:

I think I have gotten caught up in how he is dealing with it personally because I worry about his health. I think he looks completely exhausted, defeated by people who run on different energy than he does; people who are caught up in ego and have different values than him. I think the amount of stress on his shoulders is making him hate his job and I am quite comforted by the idea that he spends a lot of time with his family and that he has Michelle.

Tammy also shares similar sentiments:

Like, he went to Columbia and he didn't do too great in school, you know? And I can relate to that. I'm like, I am here and it counts. And I think that's how he felt. Like, maybe I am not excelling, but I am here and I am doing what I have to do....I mean, I have never admitted this, but I feel like he wants to do good and bring change, but he can't miraculously change the system in place. But in his heart, he really wants to.

For these respondents, they felt like they knew and understood Barack Obama and could relate to him, a person they had never personally met or ever spoken to, simply through their interaction with mediated outlets such as newspaper articles, blogs, videos, etc.

(3.) Initiating consumer activism and express opinions

Respondents described their political activism in many forms. Anthony, who shared that he did not often showcase public displays of political activism and was often embarrassed when

others did. And yet, he still found himself hanging signs in his window in support and placing a bumper sticker on his car in support of Obama. He shares:

I mean, I know those things aren't really going to change the election or even help him...it's an expression of who I am and what I choose to care about. It just felt right to me at that time and I had to express that publicly.

While some respondents like Anthony used signs and bumper stickers to show support, others respondents actively defended him against opponents that attacked his character by writing posts on social media sites like Facebook. Recently, when Obama came under attack by Donald Trump, Tammy shares:

The whole Trump thing pissed me off. The whole thing about the birth certificate and then he was like, he didn't do well in school so he should post his grades to the public...and I was like look at this fool, who cares? Shut up! And my friends were like this is ridiculous...and we posted links and messages on Facebook and Twitter against Trump.

(4.) Possessing forms of cultural production in a collective environment

(5.) Functioning as a social community and as a refuge from constraint which opens one to imagined possibilities.

Though respondents did not express any extensive creation of cultural production as described by Jenkins (1992, 2006b), Andrea, Stacy, James, Tammy, Meredith, and Anthony did convey that they watched music videos and fan videos posted online that were in support of Obama. They recalled a couple of videos created by will.i.am, a popular singer in the music group *Black Eyed Peas*, including the famous *Yes We Can* video, a collage of celebrities singing the words to Barack Obama's concession speech in the 2008 New Hampshire Primary, and *We Are The Ones*, another video-collage of celebrities expressing support for Obama. Both videos were launched on social media sites Dipdive.com and YouTube.com.

When Obama did in fact win the election, Anthony compared his joy as a personal victory similar to if his local basketball team, the Blazers, had won. He defined it as a 'We' moment. He shares that not only did Obama win that night, but 'We' the supporters also won.

However, not all respondents felt that this level of fandom was necessarily positive. Lisa, Stacy and Tammy acknowledged that voters that become emotionally attached to candidates can be blinded to drawbacks of candidates.

Today, three years after the election, many of the respondents no longer consider themselves fans of Barack Obama. Saleem expressed disappointment in some of Obama's policy decisions. Andrea and James also no longer consider Obama a celebrity but just a politician. Though they do not blame him individually for not achieving his goals, they simply state they feel less attached to him than they did during the election.

The findings suggest that there was a strong political fan culture that emerged during the 2008 election. Based on Jenkins' (1992) levels of fandom, respondents displayed and expressed fan tendencies on all counts. Respondents were emotionally attached to Barack Obama, caring about his health and feeling emotionally connected to his family's well-being. Respondents expressed outrage when opponents attacked Obama and turned to social media outlets to share their feelings with friends. Yet, there are also significant differences of fandom as described by Jenkins (1992) and political fandom as seen in this study. Being a fan of Obama during the election did not always last beyond that particular moment in time. In contrast, the same respondents who were fans of various sports teams, movies, and TV shows, expressed a greater propensity and longevity in their fandom compared to their fandom with politicians.

Further Discussion

The study results suggest that for today's American youth, popular culture has not only diffused into everyday life but is also easily accessible through online social platforms such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. These platforms allow respondents to form what Pierre Levy (2001) refers to as 'collective intelligence'—the ability to be free of geographical constraints and in turn be more productive and active as a collective whole. Hence, these platforms have given rise to both individual agency as well as a participatory culture in the form of fandom.

Though social media was utilized in the 2004 presidential election by candidates such as Howard Dean, the 2008 U.S. presidential election saw a drastic evolution in social media as it became a fully established media platform for both politicians and voters. In the study, respondents' political activism was possible because they were able to engage with Barack Obama in a social space that was part of their everyday lifestyle.

Using Jenkins' (1992) own levels of fandom, this study suggests that a fan culture is also taking place in politics and that the politically-active, American youth are engaging with politicians in a new and dynamic way through social media. Respondents attributed fan tendencies to Barack Obama as they did to sports stars, sports teams, and actors. Respondents were not only interested in learning about a politician's policy platform, but were interested, often more so, in a politician's persona such as his personal story, interaction with his family, and character. These factors were not necessarily accessible through traditional media sources but could be heavily perceived and discussed on social networks such as blogs and videos uploaded online.

Following in line with Scammell (2003) and van Zoonen (2005), the study suggests that respondents felt connected to Barack Obama through social platforms where he not only discussed his policies but also revealed his persona. It was through these platforms that they observed him appear on *Saturday Night Live* and late night talk shows. They saw clips of him interacting with both citizens and his family. In this way, the study shows that respondents used numerous social platforms in various ways to piece together the image of Barack Obama in their mind. It was through these social platforms that they felt they were privy to a personal side of Barack Obama the man, not just the politician.

Ultimately, this study suggests that though political fandom existed prior to 2008, the establishment of social media in everyday life allowed for three prime changes in political fandom between youth and Barack Obama: 1.) social media established political fandom as mainstream by connecting youth and Obama through a familiar and entertaining medium 2.) social media allowed fans greater and more frequent access to the perception and discussion of the persona of candidates, allowing them to build a fuller picture of Obama as a person; 3.) social media allowed fans to participate in the political process beyond a physical presence at a rally. Fans were able to express online support, disappointment, and outrage visible to their own personal network of friends and peers through outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.

However, research shows that social media by its very nature is created with the user as the center of his or her online universe. Social platforms such as YouTube and Facebook use algorithms that track a user's preferences and online behavior. This information is then used to let users see or access similar information. If social media platforms continue to be a place to establish and increase political fandom, than voters could be enclosed within a subjective bubble that minimizes access to information beyond one's preferred candidate.

This study raises further questions about whether Barack Obama was simply a unique candidate that attracted increased political fandom through social media and whether political fandom will be observed to the same extent again. Also, the scope of this study is limited to Barack Obama's 2008 campaign; however, further research into what role social media played throughout Barack Obama's presidential term would also lend itself to a greater conversation on this topic.

Conclusion

Barack Obama won the 2008 U.S. presidential election based on many factors. Still, it is undeniable that he was able to use social media and mobilize youth more successfully than any of his opponents. Though 2008 was not the first time politicians used social media as a strategic campaign tool, social media developed exponentially since the 2004 election. Beyond changes in media technology, the 2008 election also revealed a change taking place at the voter-level in the form of political fandom.

Political fandom is not a new concept and has been studied and discussed by scholars. However, little study or discussion has taken place on the effects of social media on political fandom. This study aimed to fill this gap by understanding the evolving characteristics of political fandom taking place at the intersection of social media and politics. While the results of this study cannot be generalized to all youth American voters, the qualitative interviews produced in-depth insight that revealed the formation of a political fan culture during the 2008 election among the youth segment that was enhanced greatly by social media.

Jenkins' (1992) levels of fandom activity served as a benchmark to validate political fandom in the context of the 2008 election. This study showed that not only did voters imbibe characteristics of political fandom but also openly considered themselves fans of Obama. They created an emotional connection with Obama beyond his political platform. Fans of Obama had a desire to learn more about his personal story, his family, his likes and dislikes, and his well-being. The study reveals that social media were the prime sources used to uncover these details. Different social sites provided different information that were then pieced together to create a full picture of his persona. Additionally, social networking sites allowed exchange of opinions with friends as well as a way to actively contribute to and support the campaign.

Voters were already present and actively using social media prior to the 2008 election. However, Obama's ability to leverage blogs, Facebook, and YouTube and other social media sites allowed voters to interact with him and transformed a typical voter-politician relationship into something more. A fan community developed attaching itself to Obama in similar ways as traditional pop culture fan communities attach themselves to film genres, celebrities and sports teams. As a result, these voters-turned-fans elevated Obama to the status of a celebrity politician.

However, there are both advantages and drawbacks to this position as a celebrity. Social media allow politicians to connect and build a relationship with their constituency. Though

this means greater transparency on part of politicians, this transparency can also have its pitfalls. While social media can turn politicians into celebrities, it can also shatter reputations and be the factor which makes politicians lose elections, as was the case in this study with McCain and Palin.

Fully exploring the advantages and disadvantages of social media are beyond the scope of this study, and can be an area for future research. Additionally, this study has started the conversation about how the structure of social media limits objectivity in democracy, as algorithms are created to surround users with ideas, comments, information and advertisements that appeal to their online user behavior. Future research on the effects of social media, objectivity and its influence on democracy could also be explored.

References

- Abercrombie, N., & Longhurst, B. (1998). *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination*. London: Sage Publications.
- Bauer, M. W., & Gaskell, G. (2000). *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound a practical handbook*. London: Sage.
- Berger, A. (1998). *Media research techniques* (2nd ed). London: Sage Publications.
- Boyd, D.M., & Ellison, N.B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1). Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- Burwell, C., & Boler, M. (2008). Calling on the Colbert Nation: Fandom, Politics and Parody in an Age of Media Convergence. *The Electronic Journal of Communication*, 18. Retrieved from <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01845.html>
- Candidate Support by Political Party. (n.d.). *Gallup*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/109042/Candidate-Support-Political-Party.aspx>
- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Come Back, Little Deaniacs. (2004, February 1). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/come-back-little-deaniacs.html>
- Corner, J., & Pels, D. (2003). Introduction. In J. Corner & D. Pels (Eds.), *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity, cynicism* (pp. 1-18). London: Sage Publications.
- Did Palin Cost McCain the Election? (2011, June 4). *Poll Insider*. Retrieved from <http://pollinsider.com/2011/06/04/did-palin-cost-mccain-the-election-another-msmestabishment-falsehood/>
- Dahl, M. (2008, November 5). Youth vote may have been key in Obama's win. *MSNBC.com*, Retrieved from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27525497/ns/politics-decision_08/t/youth-vote-may-have-been-key-obamas-win/
- Drehle, D.V. (2008, January 31). The year of the youth vote. *TIME Magazine*, Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708836,00.html>
- Ellis, C., & Berger, L. (2003). Their Story/My Story/Our Story: Including the Interviewer's Experience in Interview Research. In J. Holstein & J. Gubrium (Eds.), *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (pp. 467-494). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fisher, L. (2009, December 30). A Decade of Social Media--Timeline. *Simply Zesty: Online PR & Social Media*. Retrieved from www.simplyzesty.com/social-media/decade-social-media/
- Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Harfoush, R. (2009). *Yes we did: An inside look at how social media built the Obama brand*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders.
- Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. (1997). Active interviewing. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*. London: Sage Publications
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans & participatory culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

MSc dissertation Komal H. Parikh

- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robinson, A., & Weigel, M. (2006). Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. Retrieved from <http://newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf>
- Kaplan, A., & Haenlein, M. (2009). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Keeter, S., Horowitz, J., & Tyson, A. (2008, November 12). Young Voters in the 2008 Election - Pew Research Center. *PEW Research Center Publications*. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1031/young-voters-in-the-2008-election>
- Levy, P. (2001). Collective Intelligence. In D. Trend (Ed.), *Reading digital culture* (pp. 253-58). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lutz, Monte. (2009). The Social Pulpit: Barack Obama's Social Media Toolkit. Retrieved from <http://www.edelman.com/image/insights/content/Social%20Pulpit%20-%20Barack%20Obamas%20Social%20Media%20Toolkit%201.09.pdf>
- Marshall, P. D. (1997). *Celebrity and power: Fame in contemporary culture*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.
- Newport, F. (2008, April 11). Bush Job Approval at 28%, Lowest of His Administration. *Gallup*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106426/bush-job-approval-28-lowest-administration.aspx>
- New Voters Project Campaign. (n.d.). The Student PIRGS-Student Action For The Future. Retrieved from <http://www.studentpirgs.org/new-voters-project/>
- Pool, I. d. (1983). *Technologies of freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Rich, F. (2003, December 21). Napster Runs for President in '04. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/21/arts/napster-runs-for-president-in-04.html?src=pm>
- Rock the Vote: Youth Vote Rivals Largest in American History. (2008, November 5). Retrieved from <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/press-room/press-releases/youth-vote-rivals-largest-in.html>
- Turnout by Education, Race and Gender and Other 2008 Youth Voting Statistics. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/turnout-by-education-race-and-gender-and-other-2008-youth-voting-statistics/>
- Sabato, L. (2010). *The year of Obama: How Barack Obama won the white house*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Scammell, M. (1999). Political Marketing: Lessons for Political Science. *Political Studies*, 47(4), 718-39.
- Scammell, M. (2003). Citizen Consumers: Towards a New Marketing of Politics? In J. Corner & D. Pels (Eds.), *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity, cynicism* (pp. 117-136). London: Sage Publications.
- Smith, J. (2008, August 19). Mapping Facebook's Growth Over Time. *Inside Facebook*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2008/08/19/mapping-facebooks-growth-over-time/>
- Street, J. (1997). *Politics and popular culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Street, J. (2001). *Mass media, politics, and democracy*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- Street, J. (2003). The Celebrity Politician: Political Style and Popular Culture. In J. Corner & D. Pels (Eds.), *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity, cynicism* (pp. 85-98). London: Sage Publications.
- van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Vargas, J.A. (2008, November 20). Obama raised half a billion online. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/obama-raised-half-a-billion-on.html>

Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

You are about to participate in a study about the role of social media in shaping the future of politics as reflected by Barack Obama's 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign. You will be asked questions on your interaction with social media, politics, and Barack Obama's 2008 campaign.

This study will be conducted for my MSc dissertation at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Information you share in the interview will be recorded, transcribed and may be referred to or quoted in my dissertation. However, nothing published on the basis of the study will identify you personally and I will not pass on this information to third parties unless you give me your specific consent.

You can at any point leave the interview or ask for your comments to be removed from the data that we are gathering.

To show that you understand the conditions under which you are participating in this research project please sign on the line below.

By signing this form, I declare that I understand what this research entails and that I am participating voluntarily.

Participant Signature:

Thank you.

Appendix B: Respondent Profile

Pseudonyms of Respondents	Current Age
John	29
Stacy	28
Lisa	24
Meredith	23
Anthony	23
Saleem	26
Andrea	25
Tammy	23

All respondent's:

- * Are American post-graduate students studying at the London School of Economics
- * Voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. Election

Electronic MSc Dissertation Series

Media@lse Electronic MSc Dissertations will:

Present high quality MSc Dissertations which received a mark of Distinction (72% and above).

Selected dissertations will be published electronically as pdf files, subject to review and approval by the Editors.

Authors retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.
