

Paradigm Shift: The Narrative of American Presidential Campaigns, and the New Role of Social Media

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that political candidates for office, especially on the presidential level, must pay close attention to the narrative of their candidacy. It is also accepted that, today, a large part of that narrative is created through social media. However, while social media use has become a significant predictor of success or failure, it has not yet driven out traditional media use as the backbone of political campaigns. This is due to the fact that, at the moment, the demographics which predominantly rely on social media and those which make up the majority of America's voter base are almost mutually exclusive. Older Americans comprise a majority of voters, but a minority of social media users, while the opposite is true for younger Americans. Social media has certainly earned itself a spot as part of the political narrative already, but as generations Y and Z grow up, it should continue to become more and more central to politics in America.

Introduction

“I’m getting ready to do something...I’m running for President.” With this statement, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced her 2016 campaign for the office of the United States Presidency. She did this not in a speech to a mass of people, or to a television audience, but in a short video message released online in April 2015. The video then spread rapidly; within hours, odds are there wasn’t a single voter in America who hadn’t seen the announcement. This near-instantaneous information sharing was able to occur because of one reason: social media.

The video itself was crafted to take full advantage of the different forms of social media: it was concise—wasting no time in getting the point across—and captivating. In short, it was meant to send a clear message—or, perhaps, to tell a story. Fisher’s theory of Narrative Paradigm argues that these two actions are one and the same: in essence, this theory says that human beings are storytelling creatures by nature, and because of this all messages we send each other are inherently narrative in nature (Weigel, 2009, p. 23). Successful messages, then, are ones with consistency, coherence, and fidelity—basically, the story makes sense. Less successful messages, it follows, might be incoherent, or based on falsehoods, or otherwise less than reliable.

Fisher’s theory is extremely relevant to those seeking political office, as the goal of a campaign is to convince people to vote for a candidate. From the beginning, the candidate attempts to make their arguments and agendas clear to the voting public (Shenhav, 2009, p. 202). This shows their relevance to the issues at the table during the given election cycle, and (if successful) portrays the candidate as a logical next chapter for the country’s political narrative. In the majority of recent elections, the candidate providing the stronger narrative generally does better with the electorate (Shenhav, 2009, p. 209). Reagan followed this trend, in the 1980s. Obama did the same, in the 2000’s. And in the future, presidential candidates will continue to follow Fisher’s theory—if not by intent, then assuredly in practice. However, as certain as it is that campaigns, by their nature, tell a narrative, the means in which this narrative is dispensed is not so static. Barack Obama, in his campaigns, used social media both extensively and efficiently, as will be discussed later in this paper. But the media and technological landscapes today are about as static as the tides; the election of 2016 will take place in a world very different from that of 2008—and with very different forms of media. Thus, while social media may appear to be indispensable to today’s political campaigns, this is sure to change—one way or another—in the future.

Literature Review

After an apparent eternity of presidential power being held by an unpopular leader, a new candidate appears and takes the power back for the party of the people. Does this description bring any particular recent campaign to mind? Perhaps you immediately pictured Ronald Reagan, bringing the promise of a new American dawn. Or alternatively, Barack Obama’s more recent, audaciously hopeful campaign. Neither thought would be wrong; it turns out this description could be applied to both of these campaigns, for the two told surprisingly similar narratives. The means in which these narratives were told, however, varied significantly, as explored below.

To begin, let us examine the election of 1984. Riding the high of a generally successful first term, Ronald Reagan’s reelection campaign found itself challenged by the Democratic nominee, former Vice President Walter Mondale. Larry David Smith (1989) examines the campaigns through the lens of the narrative paradigm.

As might be expected, the two parties based their respective campaigns on standing against the values of the opposing party. The Democrats described themselves as “a coalition of diverse groups seeking ‘justice’ for all facets of society” (Smith, 1989, p. 93). In other words, the Democrats were the party of the victims, those who had been hurt by the elitist, trickle-down policies of the Republicans. On the other hand, the Republicans—by their own description—were individualist, fighting against tyrannical big government from the inside. Being the incumbent, Reagan was also able to emphasize his prior success in the fight against the bureaucracy (Smith, 1989, p. 94). While the messages of these two narratives are at odds, their language and format are considerably less so—in essence, each party is telling a story of how voters are being wronged by the opposing party. Big government or big business, party of the masses or the individual, one must only fill in the blank spaces to create the message. The American political landscape is relatively stable over short periods of time; thus, by looking at it through the narrative paradigm, one can quite easily predict the core values of a given election. That said, the repetitive nature of the duality of American politics today is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, by rehashing old arguments, the campaigns manage to place themselves unequivocally in the larger narrative of history, as further explored by Shaul Shenhav (2009).

Shenhav, in his paper, discusses the place of the narrative in the longer scope of American politics. To quote a well-known adage, “there are no new stories under the sun”. While this is generally accepted to mean that true originality in storytelling is impossible to come by, an alternate interpretation is that all stories told, rather than being self-contained, are simply continuations of previous ones. In that case, those who accept and acknowledge this fact when telling a narrative can perhaps improve their own legibility by declining to put on a pretense of originality. As Shenhav puts it, “situating contemporary occurrences within an ongoing course of events offers political leadership an opportunity to shift a single event into a larger chain of national events. Consequently, current political affairs can be interpreted, conceived and explained as part and parcel of ‘our’ mutual story” (2009, p. 201). By claiming to be part of the legacy of a generally accepted forefather, a contemporary political candidate may gain some of the legitimacy of that forebear, and thus their success (Heyer, 2004, p. 203). Perhaps this is why the first Republican debate of the 2016 cycle took place at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library?

But the author digresses; as the 2016 cycle has barely begun, there is little point in attempting to analyze it. Instead, let us look a little farther back in the narrative, to one of America’s most recent successful campaigns—that of Barack Obama, the 44th and current (at the time of writing) President of the United States. In 2008, after eight years of waning popularity for George W. Bush, America was ready for a new president. Would it be Democratic Senator Barack Obama, or Republican Senator John McCain? Of course, when Election Day came around, Obama cleaned house, not least due to a political weapon that Reagan could have only dreamed of 24 years before: an instantaneous means of communication with his followers. Social media.

While the foundations were being built throughout the early 2000’s, it was not until the 2008 Presidential election that candidates truly took advantage of social media, as the International Communication Association explores in their 2012 conference paper. This paper looks specifically at the Obama campaign’s tightly organized and well-run social media practices. Essentially, social media’s inherent ability to give supporters a direct means of interaction with the campaign gave the campaign a significantly greater ability to reach demographics that it may not have been able to without the power of Facebook, Tumblr, etc. What’s more, this direct connection allowed the campaign to route around the press and connect directly to supporters, cutting out any potential misinterpretation (intentional or otherwise) by the professional media (ICA, 2012, p. 2). However, the ICA argues that the most

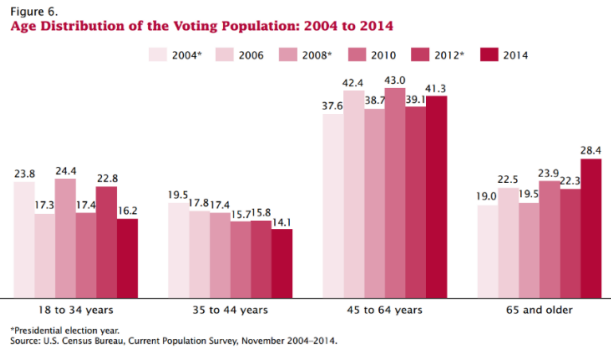
important use of social media by the Obama campaign was not direct connection to potential voters, but rather the indirect communication that campaign staffers used to less visibly direct the public mindset. By communicating and coordinating extensively with intermediary media sources, the campaign was able to disseminate information it wanted the people to know through, if not unbiased, then unaffiliated sources. While it is easy to produce and distribute content on social media, the more difficult aspect is ensuring it finds an audience—after all, even if information is on the top of every page on the internet, little is accomplished if no one reads it (ICA, 2012, p.7).

Thus, Barack Obama's narrative was born and grown through heavy use of social media, both visible and invisible. But what narrative was created? To put it concisely, Obama was portrayed as the "post-partisan candidate" (ICA, 2012, p.10). He did not get involved in irrelevant or negative arguments over which party had wronged whom, but rather argued for moving beyond disagreement into an age of bipartisanship. Notably, Obama himself had little part in creating this narrative—by design. As the above-board candidate, Obama had little reason to sully his reputation by descending into the fray of petty arguments and personal attacks that pervade the dark recesses of the internet. Instead, by taking the high road, he became almost a savior figure—here to rescue us all from the destruction and turmoil caused by the previous administration. This leap from president to savior may seem like an exaggeration, but it is in service to a larger goal: creating a segue to our next point: if social media can give a presidential candidate a near-religious following, then what effect has this technological paradigm shift had on our society?

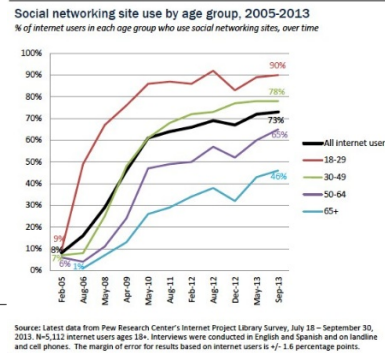
Discussion

In truth, little effect. Religious followings for our leaders, while rare, are not unheard of—after all, George Washington has been held as a god among men since even before the day he assumed office. No, while new media technologies played a part in Barack Obama's successes, they are not the primary cause, nor have they truly caused the political landscape to shift significantly as yet. This is simply because social media has not been around for very long. Usually, an informed analysis of an event or cultural shift cannot take place until a significant number of effects have run their course—years, even decades after the event has occurred. Why would this be any different for the advent of social media?

To be clear, this is not to argue that social media technologies had no effect on the 2008 election; such an argument would be folly. Instead, the argument is that social media's effect on 2008 was rudimentary at best, a kind of test run into the capabilities of the technology. While the Obama campaign did use social media to great effect, it was in service to a far more conventional purpose: getting information on traditional media outlets, such as the televised evening news (ICA, 2012, p. 22). Rather than a commentary on the campaign staffers' abilities to use new technology, this strategy speaks more to the state of America at the time: it was adopted consciously to reach demographics less likely to be influenced by, or even in contact with, the new technological landscape. In essence, the majority of American voters at the time were not ready for social media. This can clearly be seen by comparing the age distribution of the voting population (Fig. 1) with that of internet users at the time of the election (Fig. 2).



(Figure 1; File, 2015)



(Figure 2; Social Networking Fact Sheet,

In 2008, Americans over the age of 45 comprised a majority of the voting population, at 58%. At the same time, less than 1/3 of these voters were internet users. Social media being an internet phenomenon, there was simply no way for them to directly reach most voters, leading to the indirect approach through conventional media.

The narrative paradigm, in the past, has followed the convention of other mass communication theories in that it focuses on how one person or an organized group shares a message with a less organized, larger group of people. In relation to political campaigns, it covers how a given campaign portrays its candidate. Social media holds the promise of extending this paradigm, to cover situations where, rather than being the receivers, the masses are given the opportunity to tell the narrative.

Conclusion

Media have always been central to American politics. From the 18th to the 21st centuries, from Reagan to Obama and beyond, this fact will not change. The advent of new forms of media in the past, and their subsequent effects on the political landscape, have evidently not doomed our country to ruin. And so, as social media comes into its own, we can rest assured that the world will not end as we know it. This fact being secure, then, what effect will social media have on the political landscape of the future?

As always, it is difficult to tell. While hindsight is usually thought to be 20/20, foresight is more often than not considerably less reliable. The most we can do to further our understanding of the field is to continue researching, through which answers to our questions will become, if not clear, then perhaps closer. One potential topic of research to be explored could be uses and habits of social media use among America's voters, especially in the context of political campaigns. This might look into differences in use by age, ideology, background, location, or any other number of descriptive qualities. There are no downsides to increasing the information base.

Whatever this potential research may find, there is one fact that can safely be predicted from this very moment: whatever effect social media is to have on America will only increase over time. As stated above, at the time of the 2008 election, the demographics which predominantly used social media and those which made up the majority of the electorate were almost mutually exclusive. This has changed in the last 7 years, and will continue to do so in the future. Social media has certainly earned itself a spot as part of the political narrative already, but as generations Y and Z grow up, it should continue to become more and more central to politics in America.

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