

Essay

The Visual Repertoire of Obama's Run for the White House

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Presidential campaign strategies are complex and multi-faceted. In order to convince large parts of the population of a political program, a communication plan must be developed that tunes and brings together the visual and linguistic capacities of the candidate. The aim is to reach voters by means of a few catchwords and core messages and to anchor these in their minds. An election campaign team is divided into two camps, the communication staff that creates an 'image' of the candidate and the field people who efficiently analyse voter data and coordinate volunteers.

The successful 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama was conducted by a campaign team that achieved an optimal balance between building an image of the candidate and publicly dismantling the opponent. By comprehensively branding the candidate, it perfected his visual and verbal rhetoric. The control over the varied initiatives of supporters and the media succeeded through slight changes in course: Initial concerns of the black community that the Democratic candidate might be too white were countered, as were the doubts of the white population in regard to his being too black. Obama's pop-star status staged and fuelled by the media and serving the Republicans as a potential target, was counteracted by a temporary strategy of framing him as 'less-celebrity-and-Hollywood-oriented'.

Branding the candidate Barack Obama bore systematic traits and concentrated on the strong utilization of recurring graphical forms and colours as well as linguistic elements. On the visual level, Obama's most striking trademarks included his logo that laid claim to the letter O; on a verbal level, his call 'Yes we can' always managed to resonate with his audience. Obama's basic strategy was based on the promise of 'change', a concept that appeared more often in his rhetorical and visual mises-en-scène than in any of his opponents'.

Throughout, his visual vocabulary consisted in a red-white-and-blue colour scheme with an emphasis on the comforting colour of blue, as well as on the sans-serif font Gotham. This simple geometric font, inspired by signage in public urban space, appeared familiar and intimate to Americans - a feature that effectively boosted Obama's message. As with any successful consumer brand, his visual branding relied on aesthetic cohesion and strong consistency - something which had a great influence on the collective consciousness. The aim was to establish the Obama brand as an ubiquitous part of everyday life. What assisted this was the linking of visual branding with viral marketing strategies that ensured a wide dissemination of Obama's promise of change and triggered many different instances of civil involvement. Obama's campaign structure profited from the trend of social networking and in the end evolved to a 'presidential campaign 2.0', a campaign one wanted to participate in.

The barackobama.com website formed the starting point of the 'Obama for America' network. The website could be used to inform oneself of the latest events in the presidential campaign, but also to send policy recommendations to the campaign team. Registering for email and mobile phone text messages granted one up-to-date statements and decisions of Obama at an early point in time. One could also start theme-oriented blogs, organize supporters' events or establish one's own mini fund-raising websites. Various social groups - including women, children, veterans, First Americans, Arab Americans, African Americans, environmentalists - had their own 'Online Home' in which they were prompted to win over friends and acquaintances from their own community as Democratic supporters.

Barack Obama also utilized the best-known social network communities on the Internet to gain voters. He maintained a profile in 16 online communities, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, Eons, BlackPlanet and others - a cheap and effective method to make use of his supporters' personal contacts and receive and give continuous feedback.

The complex network structure to which supporters were incessantly exposed suggested the personal omnipresence and transparency of the candidate. The formulation of his profile texts, SMS and email messages sounded as if they were written by the presidential candidate himself. Emails and SMS messages were signed with Barack. The impression was constantly made as if one were an insider and stood in personal exchange with the individual 'Barack Obama'. The short and direct connection to the population proved to be the most effective means to establish 'community activism'. Obama's electoral program was conveyed to the voters by the efficient networking structure that triggered thousands of chain reactions. These communities helped recruit an army of volunteers and increase

the willingness to make donations. Obama's trust in social networking funding and his decision to dispense with the public financing system proved to be right. His record-breaking donations in turn enabled the further expansion of the community of his supporters and marketing potentials.

The social networking communities also supported the candidate with free advertising by offering incentives for spontaneous artistic actions, pictures and messages that were foremost disseminated on the Internet and in the street. Political propaganda became hip. Any kind of visual or verbal, professional or improvised means were deemed alright. The celebrities among Obama's supporters produced award-winning hits for YouTube, limited edition sneakers and art posters. Other like-minded followers left inconspicuous yet recognizable tags in the street.

The presidential campaign was mounted on numerous platforms and engendered multi-layered applications of visual communication. Because Obama's visual and verbal codes were so simple, they could be copied in a quick and easy way. His short and easily memorable name proved to be a welcome target for positive as well as negative nicknames. Anyone who wanted to make a political commentary – in whatever form – could find a forum. 'Obamania' turned into a creative movement.

Barack Obama and his campaign team were successful in reaching a large part of the population in America and elsewhere and in bridging the gap between high and low culture. During the last lap of the election campaign, Obama's message could no longer be disregarded, no matter how superficially it may have been conveyed. The interaction between the branding of Obama, the contributions by individual supporters and the response in the media overwhelmed us with a flood of messages in the form of slogans, gestures, icons, graphics, and photos.

**The wide range of visuals accompanying the 2008 presidential campaign is compiled in the timeline 'The Visual Repertoire of Obama's Run for the White House'.
<http://www.theworldasflatland.net/obama-timeline.htm>**

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