

“Obama Online: Using the White House as an Exemplar”

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As students write more for social computing contexts that they perceive as more “personal,” more “informal,” and progressively more divorced from the conventions of academic discourse, some writing program administrators and instructors have begun to intervene by offering courses in “digital rhetoric” that emphasize everyday interactions with Web 2.0 technologies and consideration of the opportunities and challenges for action on these new rhetorical stages. Such courses may encourage critical thinking about the theory and practice at work in creating and remixing content for new media genres, such as blogs, mobile microblogs, wikis, online video channels, profiles on social network sites, digital photostreams, videogames, data visualizations, and designed computer-generated environments in virtual worlds.

However, teaching about the conventions of new digital genres in everyday interpersonal transactions in the lives of private citizens also necessitates an awareness of the norms of certain intensely public new forms of rhetoric¹ In urging students to craft messages that might appeal to these large audiences, it can be useful to analyze forms of digital rhetoric that are already perceived as credible by Internet users. In other words, today’s students must still be prepared to be institutional spokespeople and use the Internet for one-to-many communication as well. Political messages from government institutions present interesting case studies for those studying public rhetoric, because they are associated with traditional establishments of knowledge and power, yet political messages may be perceived as untrustworthy because of possible partisan agendas or oligarchical tendencies. Much as the first level of digital rhetoric may cause problems for

FERPA compliance, posing questions about this second level of digital rhetoric can also create pedagogical headaches, particularly if students perceive political bias at work in the written assignments or topics for in-class discussion. To give students as much perspective as possible on this subject matter, and to reward habits of deep attention, it can be helpful to ground such courses in the metalanguage of third order digital rhetoric, an emerging scholarly discipline concerned with the rhetorical interpretation of computer-generated media as objects of study.²

In the *Virtualpolitik* book, I make the argument that Web 2.0 technologies in the hands of the state function very differently from the “participatory culture” model of democratic inclusion that is often propagated³ and that legislators on both sides of the aisle during the Bush and Clinton administrations actively discouraged many everyday digital practices of citizens, such as videogame play, file-sharing, and the use of social network sites.⁴ I also argue that these forms of cultural reaction are inevitable, given the anxieties of policy makers about how digital files can reach unintended audiences and be used for unanticipated purposes and the organizational reality that it is difficult for institutions to serve as both content-creators and regulators. The conventional wisdom seems to be that the Obama administration presents a very different kind of “virtual state” to the public, but I would claim that attempts at containing the subversive potential of information culture continue and that not all aspects of the online behavior of the office of the President are ones that we would want to encourage our students to emulate.

Of course, members of the Obama campaign and subsequent presidency have been active users of commercial social media applications and have modeled many ways to disseminate political messages successfully with remarkably few notable incidents of

stalled reception or public disgrace. Unlike Republican politicians who produced flops like the empty social network site *McCain Space* or the predictable gameplay of the Facebook application *Pork Invaders*, Obama capitalized on an ethos of participatory culture, smart mobs, user-friendly technology, and online community and promulgated ideologies of technocratic progress and direct democracy in the process.

In Fall of 2008, as the campaign was reaching its climax, my digital rhetoric students were busy analyzing how Obama's strategies of persuasion deployed computational media and distributed networks to produce a range of highly effective online texts. They friended him on Facebook, followed him on Twitter, and subscribed to his YouTube channel. In the course of conducting research, they were impressed at the volume of messages that they received in comparison to his Republican challenger and the understanding of update and status culture that his staffers demonstrated by using opportunities of time and place whenever possible. We also discussed the phenomenon of pseudo-participation and how automated responses and personalized content might give voters a false sense of inclusion and intimate connection.⁵ However, it was difficult at the time to forecast possible critiques of White House policies on ubiquity, privacy, intellectual property, and proprietary technologies without knowing the future. Now that we have had almost a year since the inauguration, I would like to examine the visual and verbal rhetoric of the president on YouTube and Flickr and suggest some ways that future digital rhetoric classes could think about online representations of power, access, transparency, efficiency, security, and many other competing values championed in the rhetorics of representative government.

Throughout the world, government agencies have adopted YouTube as a mode for broadcasting state-sanctioned video messages. Now many heads of state are looking to the United States and to the Obama administration to imitate the specific rhetorical techniques of the current American president. In retasking a YouTube platform generally associated with a fragmented politics of personal liberty and rhizomatic modes of resistance, Obama both borrows from the conventions of vernacular video and also adapts those conventions to established methods of standard official persuasion.

Of course, Obama is not the first U.S. president for whom issues of presence and persuasion have mattered in a virtual presidency. At the first inauguration of Abraham Lincoln special photographs of the event were created for stereoscopic viewers that would allow the inauguration to be experienced at a distance or recreated far away from the then unfinished Capitol dome. What is new about Obama and his YouTube performances as the nation's patriarch could be the way his rhetoric draws attention to what could be called "mediated transparency." Unlike his Republican opponent John McCain who was mocked for his use of green screen technologies that digitally effaced the physical background of a shot in favor of a virtual backdrop, the images of Obama chosen as the icons of many of his YouTube Weekly Addresses display lights, camera viewers, computer monitors, and other technological apparatuses prominently.

Obama's direct address to the YouTube viewer also references the rhetorics of many other U.S. presidents. Like Franklin Roosevelt who once advised listeners to refer to maps and other resources as he spoke, Obama uses the pedagogical pose of the "fireside chat" to explain complicated systems, such as the global economy. (It is worth

noting that the visual rhetoric surrounding Roosevelt himself often involved drawing attention to media mechanisms and heterogeneous audiences.)

Like Kennedy, who achieved fame for uttering the heartfelt but grammatically incorrect “Ich bin ein Berliner,” Obama has used YouTube to attempt to conduct public diplomacy efforts in Iran and other parts of the Middle East and even to speak to citizens abroad in their own languages. Like Kennedy, the domestic spaces of the White House are also an important part of Obama’s authority. To capitalize on his bridging of public and private forms of the body politic, YouTube addresses are often shot in different parts of the White House and emphasize different furnishings, although the flag at Obama’s left has been a constant that goes back to his first campaign appearances on YouTube. Some aspects of these compositions might also be familiar to YouTube viewers who are accustomed to a webcam cinema oriented around private homes.

As Reagan used television to speak to America after the *Challenger* disaster, Obama has used his YouTube channel to console the nation in times of collective grief. Posed near a china cabinet in a deep focus shot, Obama recounts the events involved in a recent shooting at Fort Hood. Obama has also appropriated the Reaganesque technique of calling out the names and biographical information of particular people in the assembled crowd and weaving their Main Street stories into the fabric of his rhetorical addresses. In the era of the Internet, this has sometimes involved calling up stories of hard luck or opportunity seized that are narrated by the citizens themselves on YouTube and interspersing these videos into more traditional forms of political speech.

Like Clinton, Obama has also used the rhetoric of the “town hall meeting” to present a particular model of the political crowd that might be very different from

Howard Rheingold's fast-changing and amorphous "smart mobs." Obama's incomplete engagement with the political feedback loop have also been highlighted in these "Town Hall" performances on YouTube, which began before he took office with the CNN-YouTube Democratic Party debates in July of 2007, where Obama famously answered a question from a YouTube viewer by promising to talk directly to "foreign leaders" of countries with which the United States had no diplomatic relations. Much like the "town halls" organized by the League for Political Education for radio broadcast or those held in cities like Detroit or New York by urban reformers during the twentieth century, these Internet town halls emphasize questions from ordinary citizens and orderly assemblies of seated audience members who clearly respect their roles as spectators. In its most dramatic form, the Obama Town Hall stages a kind of augmented reality display, where screens call up remote citizens in front of their webcams or the character strings of text with voter queries. The multi-tasking president shows his ability to juggle multiple channels in a virtuoso performance of communication in which he simultaneously engages with those both here and elsewhere, occupying what Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg have called the "networking of public space."⁶ Yet, although Obama has publicized the use of "Open for Questions" derived from the Internet in one of his YouTube messages, he often has avoided answering popular questions and has instead focused on responding to webcam viewers who presented a YouTube political spectacle that was deemed more appropriate.

The historical record on the official WhiteHouse.gov website shows that the George W. Bush presidency did attempt to use online video to further the neoconservative agenda, although without easily accessible Flash players like the one that

operates on YouTube, relatively few citizens chose to watch. The Bush administration did use online video during Christmas in footage that starred the family dog alongside White House advisors like Karl Rove, but the materials on BarneyCam quickly became fodder for remix comedy as well. After the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington, online video was used to disseminate content from Bush's speeches to citizens anxious about the possibility of future attacks and retaliatory warfare, but it replicated content already available on broadcast television. And the visual rhetoric surrounding the Bush presidency rarely showed the Chief Executive interacting with computer-mediated communication.

In the era of YouTube, it could be said that the site also gives the viewer lessons about how to be an ideal computer user, and that the main message from the official White House YouTube channel is that the president is a producer of computer-mediated messages, not a receiver of them. Before the inauguration Obama was often presented with mobile computing devices, such as laptops and e-mail enabled cellular phones, but now the official message coming from the White House's visual rhetoric about the first "wired president" seems to be that to be wired is to be unpresidential. Computer screens may surround the president, but he almost never is shown looking at them. On the rare occasions when he is posed in front of someone else's computer screen for the launch of a new government website, Obama appears uncomfortable in front of the monitor, usually at a woman's desk. Thus, a president may create content for YouTube, but he would never actually watch it. Since the White House allows text comments on its official channel, but response videos are prohibited, the inconvenient possibility that

citizens might be viewed as well as view is eliminated with the exception of carefully orchestrated town hall moments.

In fact, the Obama official Flickr photo stream never shows the president on his famous Commander-in-Chief Blackberry, although a rare shot may show him gesturing with it as an inanimate object. Apparently, like the cigarettes he smokes, the ubiquitous computing devices that Obama uses must be indulged in only secretly. A phone with a traditional cord that tethers him to his desk is clearly deemed much more presidential, and official White House photographs emphasize that Blackberries should be checked at the door before important meetings.

Ironically, the constraints placed by computer networks that censor content from YouTube are assumed to exist only in totalitarian regimes that might want to block the U.S. message of democratic neoliberalism. Yet moral panics have caused many jurisdictions to limit access to YouTube by children, and it is often barred from public learning environments like schools and libraries. This September Obama created a YouTube back-to-school message intended for children in public school classrooms to inspire them to work hard and show respect for the institutions of learning, although most schools in the United States block YouTube, and even teachers cannot access such video-sharing sites on school networks when needed for obvious pedagogical uses.

What may be most disturbing about the official sanctioning of YouTube by the White House, as privacy advocate Christopher Soghoian points out, is that it subjects citizens who visit the website of a public institution to YouTube's surveillance, tracking, and data mining without their knowledge or explicit consent. Although the White House has experimented with other players that do not have the proprietary software or policies

on copyright that advocates for public property might find repugnant, YouTube continues to be a chosen third-party video player. Furthermore, the close personal and financial relationship between the interests of Obama and the CEO of YouTube's parent company, Google's Eric Schmidt, is also certainly a cause for concern, given that American presidents since Teddy Roosevelt have been expected to break up corporate monopolies not legitimate them.⁷

The use of YouTube by official agencies that are pursuing e-government agendas for the United States demonstrates the distinctive way that state authority is represented in distributed digital video in modes that mimic one-to-one communication and yet reinforce the one-to-many structure by which liberal representative democracies have traditionally functioned in the mass media era. With the expanding use of commercial Web 2.0 technologies by government agencies, critics and activists are finally expressing concern that in the name of "participatory culture" the government may risk compelling its citizens to participate in particular copyright regimes that constrain speech, to submit to corporate user agreements that rewrite the social contract, and to divulge private information to commercial vendors without their consent, as government records are moved off public servers and into the privatized cloud.

¹ See danah boyd, "Social Network Sites: Public, Private, or What?," *The Knowledge Tree* (2007), <http://www.danah.org/papers/KnowledgeTree.pdf> and Siva Vaidhyanathan, "Naked in the 'Nonopticon' - The Chronicle Review - ," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 15, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/article/Naked-in-the-Nonopticon-/6197>.

² See Richard Lanham, *The electronic word : democracy, technology, and the arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Kathleen Welch, *Electric rhetoric : classical rhetoric, oralism, and a new literacy* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), J Bolter, *Writing space : computers, hypertext, and the remediation of print*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), and Ian Bogost, *Persuasive games : the expressive power of videogames* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), among others.

³ See Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture* (Minneapolis Minn. ;London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide* (New York: New York University

Press, 2006), and Howard Rheingold, *Smart mobs : the next social revolution* (Cambridge MA: Perseus Pub., 2003).

⁴ Elizabeth Losh, *Virtualpolitik : an electronic history of government media-making in a time of war, scandal, disaster, miscommunication, and mistakes* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

⁵ “virtualpolitik: The Horses of Elberfeld,” <http://virtualpolitik.blogspot.com/2006/07/horses-of-elberfeld.html>.

⁶ Kazys Varnelis, *Networked Publics* (The MIT Press, 2008).

⁷ See the chapter about the “Googlization of government” in Siva Vaidhyanathan’s forthcoming book *The Googlization of Everything*.