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Meet the Candidates: Politicians' Strategies of Self- Presentation in Online Formats

by Theresa Schlafly

Abstract: *The 2008 presidential campaign has featured widespread use of new media technologies by all major candidates, who struggle to tailor their messages for an ever-changing variety of platforms, contexts, and audiences. Using content analysis informed by linguistic theories of narrative (Schiffrin, de Fina, and Bruner) and drawing on theories of new media and politics (Davis and Owen, Bimber and Davis), this paper examines how candidates present themselves in biographies on their websites and in profiles on the social networking site Facebook. This analysis suggests that while candidate website biographies have evolved into a relatively standardized form, candidate social networking site profiles are currently in an experimental trial-and-error stage of new media adoption.*

Introduction

Widespread use of new media technologies by all major candidates has characterized the 2008 presidential election. Information about the candidates can be found in countless new media formats, including candidate websites, campaign blogs, online videos, and social networking site profiles. In 1999, Owen and Davis defined “new media” as “mass communication forms with primarily nonpolitical origins that have acquired political roles,” including “talk radio, television news magazines, electronic town meetings, tabloids, MTV, and the Internet” (Owen and Davis, 7; vii). Although some of these media are arguably no longer “new,” they continue to be adapted and implemented in new ways by political campaigns, and are reaching ever-growing numbers of potential voters, even as they are supplemented by newer media forms.

This paper will examine how candidates choose to represent themselves online, specifically in their campaign website biographies and in profiles on the social networking site Facebook, using content analysis informed by linguistic theories of narrative. Unlike other more traditional forms of political content, these online outlets are situated at a complicated intersection between public and private genres of personal representation. In presenting biographical profiles of themselves in these online formats, candidates face a particular challenge: they must balance the political need to project a well-polished and consistent appearance, on the one hand, with the stylistic expectations of online communication, characterized by spontaneity, casualness, and personal connection, on the other. Candidates also face the further difficulty of differentiating their online presences

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from their competitors'. The 2008 presidential election campaign, well within the early stages of adoption of these technological applications into political campaigns, provides a useful context in which to examine how candidates are employing new media strategies in self-representation. I hypothesize that a comparison of candidates' online autobiographical representations will reveal that candidates and their campaign advisors are currently in a phase of experimentation of how best to present their online personae.

Candidate self-presentation: Appeal of new media

Bimber and Davis explain the current American election system's emphasis on individual candidates, identifying the following causes for the shift from an earlier emphasis on political parties: "[t]he destruction of patronage systems, the replacement of the single-party ballot, the growth of nonpartisan elections at the local level, and especially the development of the primary system" (Bimber and Davis, 73). The continuing reliance on the visual medium of television has also contributed to the increasing importance placed on candidates' appearances and personalities. According to Bimber and Davis, "how candidates present themselves as individuals to their audiences is a vitally important part of campaigning, in the worlds of both old and new media" (Bimber and Davis, 73). In the current media era, candidate presentation encompasses not only political experience and opinions on issues, but also character, sincerity, and likeability. Moments such as Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall Show (1992) have established the standard for non-political appearances by subsequent candidates – it is now common for candidates to appear as guests on programs such as *The Daily Show* or *Oprah* and to discuss a wide range of topics unrelated to politics.

In the age of the diminishing sound bite, candidates find it difficult to disseminate messages, both political and personal, without their words being edited or replaced by journalists' interpretations. As Davis and Owen explain, "[d]espite the fact that more reporters covered them than had ever done so in political campaigns, and despite the proliferation of news channels with an insatiable appetite for news, by 1992 presidential candidates were seeking alternative means to reach voters. The search was on for media that would not compress their message nor distort it" (Davis and Owen, 43). New media such as Internet sites offer candidates platforms to publish their own messages "outside the boundaries of journalistic gatekeepers" (Davis and Owen, 212). Use of new media allows candidates to present themselves in an informal personal setting and to reach a large number of voters, and frees them from traditional journalists' edits and commentary.

Bill Clinton's campaign constructed the first major candidate website in 1992; by 2008, such websites have become standard for candidates competing at all levels of political office. Typically, a candidate's website includes such features as news updates, texts of the candidate's speeches, a section where users can donate money online, information about the candidate's stances on various issues, and a biography of the candidate. Although these biographies vary from candidate to candidate, a number of common features are shared by most major presidential candidate sites. Presidential candidate profiles on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are also common, allowing other users to add themselves to the candidates' networks as "fans" or "supporters" and to create a variety of applications allowing them to receive news feeds or to display quotes by the candidates on their own profile pages, for example.

The Internet undoubtedly changes the way that voters learn about candidates in terms of speed and accessibility of information that might be available elsewhere. However, this technology also offers a new perspective on the candidates. Much in the way that television provided a new view of Nixon and Kennedy's appearances and mannerisms in the 1960 debates, Internet sites have the potential to present a new perspective on candidates' personalities and opinions. As social networking sites, online journals, and individual blogs become more and more popular, candidates try to use these communication technologies to connect with increasing numbers of voters on a personal level, just as they once shook hands and kissed babies on whistle-stop tours. Rather than simply presenting a collection of policy information and campaign event schedules, website profiles provide a platform for voters to learn about candidates' upbringings, favorite movies, and families. For candidates, these media present an opportunity to project particular personae which they hope will appeal to voters.

Discussing the 2004 election, Bill Clinton reflected that “we’d almost gotten back to pre-television style grassroots voter contact. . . . and part of it is due to the explosion of alternative communications options over the Internet” (Clinton, 2004 Urban Institute speech). It remains to be seen whether the effects of online contact between candidates and voters are in fact similar to those of “grassroots voter contact,” but it is clear that candidates and their campaign advisors aim to connect with voters in a personal way online.

Narratives and Identity

Almost every aspect of candidates’ behavior, from accent to food preferences to clothing choices, can be interpreted as projecting some significant facet of their identities. For example, coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign has included discussions of Hillary Clinton’s neckline choices and of Barack Obama’s preference for arugula, analyzed in terms of their feminist and elitist identities. (Givhan, Powell and Zeleny, and Kurtz). Candidates also present their identities through their own conscious depictions of themselves. Stories told by candidates about themselves index their identities in a particularly telling way, as hearers are used to interpreting such narratives in interactions. By relating a story, a narrator positions him- or herself within a social context, exercising certain beliefs and actions, and in comparison to other figures portrayed in the story. As De Fina explains, “narratives are loci for the display of self-representations because they build storyworlds in which narrators introduce themselves and others as figures and use categories to define their identity (or the identity of others) that are often presented (implicitly or explicitly) as playing crucial roles in the explanation of the actions themselves” (De Fina, 356).

Furthermore, as Schiffrin emphasizes, “identity is neither categorical nor fixed,” and thus the particular identity portrayed in a story depends on the context in which the story is told. Schiffrin proposes a view of speech activities and the interactions in which they occur as “a frame in which our social roles are realized and our identities are displayed.” She explains that “[o]ur transformation of experience into stories, and the way we carry it out, is thus a way to show our interlocutors the salience of particular aspects of our identities” (Schiffrin, 199). Thus, depending on the context, different facets of a narrator’s identity can be emphasized by different narratives, or by different versions of the same narrative. The story a teller chooses to tell, and how it is told, can present a number of facets of identity, such as national, ethnic, family, religious, and professional identity. Narratives can send implicit messages about their narrators – that is, a story can reveal intelligent or sympathetic qualities of its narrator, without the narrator explicitly stating “I am intelligent” or “I am sympathetic.” This potential of narrative can be especially significant for political candidates, who can choose to tell narratives highlighting different features of their identity depending on their particular audiences.

Schiffrin draws on a visual metaphor to describe storytelling as “provid[ing] a self-portrait: a linguistic lens through which to discover peoples’ own (somewhat idealized) views of themselves as situated in a social structure” (Schiffrin, 199). Candidate biographies, then, typically provide a self-portrait which is extremely idealized, one which has been airbrushed and edited by a team of political consultants. However, for the candidates, these narratives are free from the constraints of journalistic editing; as Davis and Owen explain, “[o]ne of the primary impetuses for candidates’ use of new media is their desire to tell their story in their own words” (Davis and Owen, 214). Thus, these narratives certainly do not show the “true” individual identity of the candidates as might be revealed by a narrative told spontaneously in a private interaction, but can certainly demonstrate how the candidates hope to present themselves to the voting public through their life stories.

Online autobiographical narratives, then, present a particularly challenging opportunity for candidates. Those narratives can provide a powerful way for candidates to connect with voters, by indexing their identities through

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narratives, while presenting them as likeable in accessible and easily comprehensible formats. Candidates must balance the conflicting needs of presenting a polished and consistent image vetted by campaign consultants, on the one hand, and appearing sincere and spontaneous within genres characterized by casual and soul-baring writing styles, on the other. The potentially large and diverse audience for online autobiographical narratives makes it impossible for candidates to tailor their presentations for listeners with particular geographical, socioeconomic, religious, or other demographics, as they might in a town-hall meeting, prayer breakfast, or other live event. Instead, they must present their stories in order to appeal to the widest possible audience without alienating any groups.

Comparison of candidate self-presentation in website biographies

In order to establish an overview of candidate website biographies, I will compare the website biographies of sixteen major primary candidates for the 2008 presidential election: Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, Mike Gravel, Mike Huckabee, Duncan Hunter, Dennis Kucinich, John McCain, Barack Obama, Ron Paul, Bill Richardson, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo, and Fred Thompson. All sixteen candidates established websites with a section devoted to a candidate biography, with titles such as “Rudy’s Story” or “About Chris.”

It is clear that many of the candidate website biographies share a number of elements, many of which will be described here. All sixteen are written in the third person. (Joe Biden’s does include six sentences by him in the first person, set apart by quotation marks, interspersed between the third-person paragraphs.) The fact that the biographies are written in the third person allows the candidates to include a substantial amount of evaluation in the texts, while maintaining the effect of objectivity. For example, Fred Thompson’s biography states that “Thompson has been a man of the times and a man for the times, adapting his unique abilities and leveraging today’s communications technologies to speak to the American people about issues he feels are important to the nation.” It is difficult to imagine this sentence appearing on the website in the first person. Even less subjective assessments, such as referring to Hillary Clinton’s “path-breaking election to the United States Senate” or to Chris Dodd as “a respected leader,” sound more legitimate when in the third person. However, combining evaluative statements with information that could only have been known by the candidates, and considering the fact that no author is credited, leads to a disjointed effect of semi-autobiographical but semi-anonymous authorship.

All of the biographies introduce their subjects by first name (“Learn About Mitt,” “Meet Barack”) or by first name and last name (“About John McCain,” “Meet Joe Biden”); that is, none use professional titles such as “Senator” in the title of the biography. This serves to establish solidarity with the audience, portraying the candidates as approachable and as “regular people.” Hillary Clinton’s biography carries this strategy to the furthest extent, referring to her only as “Hillary,” never as “Clinton,” “Hillary Rodham Clinton,” or “Senator Clinton.” In addition to presenting her informally, encouraging voters to connect with her on a personal level, this referent choice also allows her to distance herself from her husband, former President Bill Clinton, emphasizing her individual political identity.

The biographies follow different structures in terms of how the information is presented. Several begin with the candidate’s birth (for example, “Barack Obama was born in Hawaii on August 4th, 1961”), while others begin with a statement introducing some aspect of the candidate’s values (for example, “John McCain has a remarkable record of leadership and experience that embodies his unwavering lifetime commitment to service”). The length of the biographies varies from 178 words (Tancredo) to 2672 words (Kucinich), with an average length of 1127 words; ten of the sixteen biographies are between 450 and 850 words. Interestingly, the two most extreme biographies in length are for candidates who are widely considered to have very little chance of being elected. The extreme length of Kucinich’s biography may be due in part to his struggles for inclusion in the mainstream media coverage, as his website represents one of the few media platforms available for distribution of his message. Additionally, Kucinich’s biography seems to reflect a more individualist and unedited style, including elements not found in any others (such as a description of the current state of landmark

buildings from his childhood) and even a spelling error (“publically” for “publicly”). These trends suggest that the more mainstream candidates rely on their advisors to survey their opponents’ websites and fit into a shared norm of what is expected. The less polished outsider candidates may spend less time than the other candidates (or their advisors) researching the websites of their opponents, leading to a less homogenous style.

Of the sixteen biographies, eleven list the candidate’s birthplace and/or childhood home, and refer to specific values learned in childhood, usually from the candidate’s parents. For example, “John [Edwards] learned the values of hard work and perseverance from his father, Wallace, who worked in the textile mills for 36 years, and from his mother, Bobbie, who ran a shop and worked at the post office.” Of the five biographies that do not mention birthplace and childhood, two (McCain’s and Romney’s) do mention heritage and family as sources of inspiration; two others (Hunter’s and Huckabee’s) depict experiences in young adulthood (military and religious, respectively) as formative.¹ Thus, the early years of life are portrayed by nearly all of the biographies as significant and as contributing in some way to the candidate’s current world view and political beliefs. Similarly, in many cases, events from the candidates’ early political careers are viewed as significant for their later accomplishments. For example, Kucinich’s biography analyzes his role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process: “It was not the first nor, hopefully, will it be the last time Dennis Kucinich ignored political dangers to do the right thing. After all, it is his life story.” As Bruner (1990) explains, the coherent portrayal of life events and decisions demonstrates a particular aspect of autobiography:

[T]he larger story [of an autobiography] reveals a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (not causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone a particular way. The Self as narrator not only recounts but justifies. And the Self as protagonist is always, as it were, pointing to the future. When somebody says, as if summing up a childhood, ‘I was a pretty rebellious kid,’ it can usually be taken as a prophecy as much as a summary (Bruner, 121).

Although the candidates are not the actual narrators of these biographies, they are nonetheless the implicit sources for them. Thus, by choosing certain parts of the past to include, they justify and explain the later events of their biographies.

In candidate biographies, the connection between past events and aspects of current identity can be drawn with varying degrees of explicitness. For example, we learn that “[i]t has been the rich and varied experiences of Barack Obama’s life - growing up in different places with people who had differing ideas - that have animated his political journey.” The use of the journey metaphor strengthens the portrayal of Obama’s early life as leading decisively to his current identity. Even more concretely, we read that Kucinich wrote an essay in tenth grade describing his goal of one day becoming President of the United States. In some biographies, the effects of past events on the current candidate are portrayed more generally: “Governor Richardson attributes his work ethic and striving nature to the lessons his parents taught him,” or “Rudy was taught the value of a strong work ethic and a deep respect for America’s ideal of equal opportunity.” In these examples, the aspects of identity attributed to the candidates’ pasts are abstract values which many Americans share. Establishing further solidarity, many Americans undoubtedly feel that their parents taught them a work ethic, or that their immigrant backgrounds led them to respect America’s opportunities. The Richardson and Giuliani examples demonstrate an even stronger link between the reader and the candidate than the Obama and Kucinich examples, as not everyone shares the specific past events to which those biographies refer (growing up in different places, writing about becoming President in a tenth grade essay). These examples all show how narratives incorporating past events can portray current facets of identity in various ways, with different implications for readers of the narratives.

1 The omission of McCain’s birthplace from his biography may have been a conscious choice, in order to avoid drawing attention to the fact that he was born outside of the United States (in the Panama Canal Zone).

Although a detailed comparison of further aspects of these campaign sites is outside the scope of this analysis, it is clear that many features are shared by most of the candidate biographies, including third-person narration, length, informal reference to the candidates, and allusions to past events as significant for current identity. Furthermore, it is clear that candidates and their advisors seem to be employing particular strategies in presenting themselves by means of these autobiographical narratives, such as the emphasis on the candidate's approachability through use of a first name as referent. Given the variety of ways that the candidates could have developed biographical presentations on their websites – for example, through a first-person text, a biography explicitly written by a particular author, or even an audio or video biography – the level of similarity found among all of the website biographies is surprising. Because candidate websites have existed since 1992, the form seems to have evolved into a standardized political text genre.

Social networking site profiles and identity

Candidate website biographies present an interesting case for analysis of candidates' deliberate strategies in online self-presentation. It is clear that creating a campaign website requires a substantial amount of planning and resources, such as hiring graphic designers and computer programmers. Thus it seems likely that the major choices made for the website reflect the strategy intended by the senior campaign staffers and, by extension, the candidates themselves. However, websites are by no means the only online context in which candidates present themselves; the growing popularity of social network sites such as Facebook means that candidates can potentially use them to disseminate information to millions of users. Furthermore, as the use of social network sites is still new to presidential campaigns, candidates are still experimenting with how best to portray themselves in this format, making candidate social network site profiles a particularly rich context in which to explore candidate strategies for self-presentation in new media. In this section, after a brief overview of the social networking site Facebook, profiles of various candidates on Facebook will be compared.

Originally developed in 2004 as a networking site for college students, Facebook membership is now open to anyone with an email address; the site currently lists 70 million active users worldwide (defined as registered users who have returned to the site in the last 30 days). Unlike a polished website, a Facebook profile can be created by anyone in only a few minutes. According to the Facebook Press Room Factsheet, "Facebook is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them." Although Facebook emphasizes the social aspect of its networking potential such as its usefulness in planning parties and keeping up with friends, its applications have expanded to include other groups, such as neighborhood communities or networks for employees of the same company. Facebook's role in politics has yet to be fully realized, but it is clear that the widespread popularity of the site and its ability to share information and to establish networks of users make it a potentially powerful tool for encouraging civic engagement.

On Facebook, as on many other social network sites, users can choose which features to list in their personal profiles, including options such as "Relationship Status," "Education," and "About Me," as well as lists of preferences such as "Favorite Movies," "Favorite Music," "Interests," "Activities," and "Favorite Quotes." Researchers studying social networking sites have explored the ways that these lists of cultural preferences serve to index user identity. For example, Liu found that "these lists of interests can function as taste performances," concluding that "the social network profile's lists of interests might actually be more useful as an indicator of one's aesthetics than as a factual declaration of interests" (Liu, 273). Although it is not clear exactly how readers interpret these lists, it is apparent that their potential effect reaches beyond simply creating solidarity with readers who like the same movies or books; instead, these lists make up a composite portrait of the writer's aesthetic identity. Like the telling of autobiographical narratives, the preference lists situate the creator within a social context. The process of creating a profile challenges candidates (or, more likely, their staffers) to list preferences which make the candidates seem likeable and sincere – a task made especially difficult by the likelihood that every choice they make will be scrutinized by journalists and critics.

Comparison of candidate Facebook profiles

Although the 2008 presidential candidates are using Facebook (and other networking sites) for a variety of functions, such as sharing photos and videos, publishing news about the candidates, linking supporters to one another, and recruiting volunteers for specific events, this analysis will only consider the candidates' presentations of themselves, in the "About Me" and preference sections as well as in any separate biographies on the profile pages.

Comparison of candidate profile pages immediately reveals differences in the types of personae that candidates aim to project. Some candidates mimic a non-politician's social profile. For example, Barack Obama lists his activities as "Basketball, writing, loafing w/ kids" and his favorite TV show as *Sportscenter*; the only hint toward politics in his preference section is his inclusion of *Lincoln's Collected Writings* alongside *Song of Solomon* and *Moby Dick* in his list of favorite books. Similarly, according to John McCain's profile, his interests are "Sports, Hiking, Fishing, Boxing, Basketball, Football, Baseball, History;" his favorite TV shows are *24* and *Seinfeld*; and his favorite movies are *Viva Zapata*, *Letters From Iwo Jima*, and *Some Like It Hot*. Although *24*, *Viva Zapata*, and *Letters from Iwo Jima* seem to highlight McCain's military background, they also could be favorites of many civilians and non-politicians.

In sharp contrast, some candidates use sections of their Facebook profiles as outlets for disseminating their political agendas. John Edwards lists his favorite activities as "Basketball and running. Talking with New Hampshire voters" and his interests as "Fighting poverty. Raising the minimum wage. Stopping the genocide in Darfur." The listing of "talking with New Hampshire voters" seems insincere as a genuine favorite activity, especially when juxtaposed with the more typical leisure activity of basketball. While his list of interests ("fighting poverty," "raising the minimum wage," and "stopping the genocide in Darfur") are admirable and presumably sincere goals, they seem odd in a section more usually filled with hobbies such as travel or gardening. Similarly, although Mitt Romney's listed activities do not seem unusual – "Spending time with family - especially grandchildren, running, reading, skiing, horseback riding with my wife, waterskiing, and watching movies" – his list of interests seems out of place: "Besides my family, I have great interest in strengthening this country and our economy. Fixing our failing schools so we can better compete with emerging Asia and making health care more affordable through free market reforms. And, most importantly, winning the war against the jihadists to ensure that Americans are kept safe." Jarringly, these interests are followed immediately by Romney's list of favorite music, which includes Roy Orbison, the Beatles, and the Kingston Trio.

The explicitly biographical information in candidates' Facebook profiles also represents a variety of choices. Some candidate pages include the biographies from their websites, or excerpted and/or revised versions of them (in addition to providing links to the websites themselves, which all of the candidate profiles do). Some profiles, such as Mike Huckabee's, forgo a paragraph-form biography in favor of a resume-style list of previous political experience. Others, such as Dennis Kucinich's and Mike Gravel's, use the "About Me" section to list their political priorities. John Edwards presents a combination of personal and political information in his "About Me" section, the entirety of which appears here: "Born in Seneca, South Carolina. My dad was a millworker. I went to public schools. Met my life partner, Elizabeth (isn't she great). Proud father of four children. As a lawyer, I stood up against the powerful. As a Senator, I stood up for you. Currently fighting poverty. Go Tar Heels!" The conciseness and apparently spontaneous conversational tone do make this biography seem well-suited to the genre of social networking site profiles. However, the combination of the informal conversational style with the listing of political accomplishments, as well as the mixing of professional, political, and personal information, creates an overall effect that is disjointed, suggesting conflicting motivations in the profile's composition.

These examples demonstrate that candidates and their advisors are still defining what kind of space Facebook and similar sites represent. Although it is difficult to compare the candidates' website biographies and their Facebook profile biographies directly, this analysis suggests that the website biography is at this point a more well-established and stable genre, with clearer strategies being used by candidates. In addition to the factor of

the relative newness of the two technologies, another cause for this difference could be the relative amount of focus and resources devoted to them by the campaigns. As previously discussed, websites require planning by graphic designers and programmers, while Facebook profile pages may be created more hastily by younger, more inexperienced staffers.

Hillary Clinton's biography on hillaryclinton.com, Facebook and MySpace

Comparisons of candidates' uses of website biographies and social network profiles have shown the variety of choices made by different candidates in these contexts. In this section, one candidate's website biography, Facebook profile, and MySpace profile will be examined, in order to allow a direct comparison across the three contexts.

Hillary Clinton's website biography follows the general trends outlined above. It begins: "Hillary was raised in a middle-class family in the middle of America," characterizing her as someone with whom a large percentage of readers could identify. The biography goes on to refer to her "classic suburban childhood" and to her early introduction to lessons of the American dream: "The promise of America was very real as Hillary was growing up. She learned that no matter who you are or where you're from, if you worked hard and played by the rules, you could provide a good life for your family." This statement implicitly links her childhood lessons to her current views on America. Clinton's website directly frames her biography as a cohesive narrative combining personal events and political achievements, giving it the title "Hillary's Story."

In the "About Me" section of her Facebook profile, Hillary Clinton presents the following statement:

I was raised in a middle-class family in the middle of America. From that classic suburban childhood in Park Ridge, Illinois, I went on to become one of America's foremost advocates for children and families; an attorney twice voted one of the most influential in America; a First Lady of Arkansas who helped transform the schools; a bestselling author; a First Lady for America who helped transform that role, becoming a champion for health care and families at home and a champion for women's rights and human rights around the world.

Readers may recognize this as the first paragraph from her website biography which has been changed to the first person. This translation is not entirely successful. While the third-person version of the statement sounds like the work of an admiring but credible biographer, the first-person version sounds arrogant. Also, excerpting the first paragraph of the biography does not really give a comprehensive overview of her career – it does not even mention her experience as senator (information which immediately follows this paragraph in the website biography). Clinton's Facebook profile does link to her website biography, so that users seeking more biographical information can easily find it; however, those readers will immediately see the third-person version of the paragraph they have just read on the Facebook page. This seems to call attention to the artificial nature of this profile, which may have been created by a staffer without much input from Clinton or her senior advisors.

Clinton's Facebook page lists some of her interests, but does so in a somewhat inconsistent format. She lists her "Interests" as "Reading, speed walking, doing crossword puzzles, movies, spending time with friends and family" and her "Favorite Music" as "Carly Simon, Aretha Franklin, The Rolling Stones, U2." These categories both follow the typical Facebook profile list format. However, for "Favorite Movies," her profile shifts to a paragraph form which seems more like a transcription of an oral interview than an online profile:

When I was much younger, The Wizard of Oz was my favorite movie. I just loved imagining myself being there with Dorothy and being part of that great adventure she had. Probably when I was in college and law school, Casablanca. I watched it I don't know how many times. It was always so much fun. By the time we watched it over and over again, we were actually reciting the dialogue. And I suppose in the last years, Out of Africa. I love Meryl Streep and Robert Redford. Those are my favorite movies.

Here, Clinton discusses her favorite movies without really saying anything substantial – the comments “I watched it I don’t know how many times” and “it was always so much fun” could apply to any well-liked movie. The prose does not add anything to the list of movie titles, and the comments are so vague that they do not leave the reader feeling that he or she has been confided in by the writer. The summary at the end – “those are my favorite movies” – reinforces the impression that this might have been taken from a verbal interview, making Clinton appear unfamiliar with the online profile format.

Clinton’s MySpace profile includes a blurb titled “About Me,” which consists of the same first paragraph of her website biography which was excerpted in the Facebook profile. However, in this case, the paragraph is left in the third person, rather than shifted into the first person, which does not fit its title “About Me.” Like Clinton’s Facebook profile, her MySpace profile gives an incomplete version of her biography, omitting information about her senatorial experience, further contributing to its unpolished effect.

Hillary Clinton’s MySpace profile includes some of the same personal information as her Facebook profile – for example, both profiles list *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin as a book she recently enjoyed. However, the MySpace profile does not include “Favorite Movies” and other categories, but does include some new categories of information. For example:

Home task that needs tending: *Organizing my closets.*

Worst habit: *Chocolate.*

Both of these seem to be points with which many women would identify. This type of statement seems to represent a logical strategy for Clinton, who has sometimes struggled to appear likeable and approachable. However, Clinton’s MySpace profile also lists:

Cars you drive: *For security reasons, we drive in Secret Service vehicles but the Service lets us use a Ford hybrid when we’re home in New York.*

Although this statement may have been chosen to highlight her commitment to the environment and to American industry, signified by her preference for a hybrid car made by an American company, it seems alienating to emphasize the fact that she normally drives in Secret Service vehicles.

Clinton’s MySpace profile includes a section called “**Hillary on the Issues**” which links to policy statements on her websites such as “Strengthening the Middle Class” and “Ending the War in Iraq.” After the closet-organizing point, this has a disjointed effect, although by linking to the policy statements rather than excerpting them, the overall visual effect of the profile is still casual and informal. Finally, a section with the heading “Heroes” is completely blank, giving the impression that the profile is somehow unfinished. This is surprising considering the number of staffers and consultants employed by Clinton’s campaign, suggesting that the creation of the MySpace profile was not a high priority for the campaign.

Conclusion

As new technologies are incorporated into political campaigns, it is not always clear how candidates can employ them most successfully. Davis and Owen explain this process: “New communication forms emerge in the political media realm, sparking elite interest and stimulating public curiosity. These emergent media work, often through trial and error, to establish their place in the political communication hierarchy” (Davis and Owen, 3). The cases examined here represent two different stages in this period of trial and error. The website biographies have evolved into a relatively stable political genre, subject to some innovation and adaptation but generally used in similar ways by different candidates. These biographies have proven to be a way for candidates to present a brief version of their political resumes in combination with personal narratives

emphasizing upbringing, patriotism, and family values.

Social network site profiles, on the other hand, seem to be in a state of flux as candidates experiment with using them in different ways. Is a candidate's Facebook profile another forum for stating political platforms, or is it a venue for revealing one's personal identity – or at least some aspect of one's identity which has been carefully selected for its potential voter appeal? Or is it some hybrid of the two? Should it be the equivalent of an MTV interview or an appearance on *Meet the Press*, or something in between? The social network profiles exist at a complicated intersection between personal and public space, a territory which candidates are still figuring out how to negotiate.

As politicians use these new formats in different ways, voters will develop approaches to interpreting them. Recently, the press reported that recipes posted on John McCain's website which purported to be his wife's family recipes were actually taken from online sources such as the Food Network website (Bumiller). The campaign blamed the incident on an intern, but no one seemed surprised that Cindy McCain had not actually posted the recipes herself. Incidents such as "Farfallegate" further show that candidates and their staffers, voters, and the press are still developing strategies for using and interpreting new media. Analysis of voter response to these sites may eventually determine what the most successful approach will be; until then, it seems likely that candidates and their advisors will continue to experiment.

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(Note: The candidate website biographies were originally accessed in December 2007. Some sites were changed after candidates dropped out of the race. Earlier versions of the sites are available through the Internet Archive at <http://www.archive.org>.)

<http://www.joebiden.com>

<http://www.hillaryclinton.com>

<http://chrisdodd.com>

<http://johnedwards.com>

<http://www.joinrudy2008.com>

<http://www.gravel2008.us>

<http://www.mikehuckabee.com>

<http://www.gohunter08.com>

<http://www.dennis4president.com>

<http://www.johnmccain.com>

<http://www.barackobama.com>

<http://www.ronpaul2008.com>

<http://www.richardsonforpresident.com>

<http://www.mittromney.com>

<http://teamtancredo.org>

<http://www.fred08.com>

<http://www.facebook.com>

<http://www.myspace.com>