

**Obama's *twittersphere* and *facebooksphere* during the Health Care Reform debate:
A path towards a multiple role for the statesperson in the network society?**

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Abstract

Based on a study of the United States Health Care Reform policy debate in 2010, this thesis identifies, compares and contrasts four archetypical roles performed by the US president Barack Obama in two social networking channels employed by the White House and by the grassroots organisation Organizing for America. To undertake this research, a textual analysis was performed on the institutional communication content employed in the campaign for universal health care, before legislation on the Health Care Reform was voted and approved in the United States Congress (January to March 22). This analysis focused on understanding Obama's manifold online personae and the nuances of the social media milieu. This case study, which reveals the President's various positions in the American political arena, is analysed by extrapolating the concepts of *remediation*, *produsage* and *cyberbalkanisation*, and how these are at hand in each of the presentations of four identified archetypes: grassroots activist, bipartisan unifier, Commander-in-Chief and pop icon.

A brief recount of how Obama's predecessors used presidential communication channels and how their institutional messages were configured by these media is offered, as well as insight on his political philosophy in regards to community organising and how this approach to activism translates into Web 2.0 informational frameworks.

Keywords

• Barack Obama • Health Care Reform • Web 2.0 • presidential communications • network society • political archetypes • Facebook • Twitter • *produsage* • remediation • cyberbalkanisation • pop icon • grassroots • bipartisan unifier • Commander-in-Chief

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Table of contents

	Page
I. Barack Obama and the paradigm shift	6
...it all began in 2007	8
The audacity to click	11
Health Care Reform and beyond	14
II. Among US presidents, the medium can <i>really</i> be the message	17
Obama as the “Geek-in-Chief”	20
Digital triumvirate: <i>remediation, produsage, cyberbalkanisation</i>	21
From Reagan to Obama: striving to fulfil the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE	29
III. Organizing for America: grassroots for the digital age	38
All roads lead to Chicago	40
IV. Obama’s <i>facebookosphere</i> and <i>twittersphere</i> during the Health Care Reform debate	44
1. The grassroots activist	51
2. The bipartisan unifier	66
3. The Commander-in-Chief	73
4. The pop icon	78
5. The role of other actors in crafting Obama’s “voice”	81
V. Conclusions: who constructs Barack Obama?	85
Appendix A. Health Care Reform debate timeline, key events. January-March 2010.	89
Appendix B. List of Figures and Tables	90
Bibliography	94

**Obama's *twittersphere* and *facebooksphere* during the Health Care Reform debate:
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I. Barack Obama and the paradigm shift

“If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?”

– Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

The recent political turmoil in the United States,¹ triggered by, among other issues, the debate over the Health Care Reform championed by the United States President Barack Obama, reveals not only a deep division in America's political sphere –between Democrats and Republicans– but also the nature of the presidency's use of social media and coordinated online and offline campaign efforts.

The move towards universal health care provision in the United States was, is and will be a controversial subject in the American public and private spheres. The two divergent positions –broadly, for and against a considerable expansion of State intervention in the provision of health care services, for and against universal coverage– represent a pairing of opposing political and philosophical ideologies. On one hand, there is the liberal position (aligned with Republican Party policymakers), which sees the market as an optimal regulator of a limited resource, ensuring that each citizen gets the health care coverage she or he deserves or has worked for. On the other, there is a move towards a model of State-regulated health care that covers the whole of the population and follows the Western European model. The push for this kind of health care system is a perfect cause for a grassroots movement and a community-oriented

¹ Characterised by the rise of the Tea Party (a conservative grassroots movement) and the declining approval ratings for the President (as of September 28, 2010, his approval was at a mere 44.5% and 60.5% of the population thought that the country was on the “Wrong Track”, according to RealClearPolitics.com).

government (as well as for long-standing Democratic Party objectives), as it seeks the interest of the “common good” over the “industrial values” represented, in this case, by the insurance companies and corporate health care providers.

Perhaps more than any other issue, including international war efforts, the debate over the American health care system has divided the two major parties in the United States. The importance of the reform, as Democratic Party members of the House of Representatives stressed in the video “Affordable, quality healthcare for all: a historic journey”,² cannot be understated, regardless of partisan affiliations. During the debate leading to the final vote in Congress on March 22nd 2010, President Obama’s press offices emphasised its “historic” quality time and time again. From academia, authors like Kotlikoff (2007) had been stressing the need for a reform for years. He opens his economics volume on the problem, *The Healthcare Fix*, with an apocalyptic warning: “The United States is now... perpetrating a suicidal status quo. Its policies, primarily those connected with Medicare, Medicaid, and the rest of the healthcare system, are driving the country to fiscal, financial, and economic ruin.” (1) This policy battleground is, moreover, a proper scenario as any to analyse the performative mechanisms of Obama’s White House communications and their approach to controversial issues. This, in turn, helps us understand the way in which the current administration manages its interaction with other actors, such as voters or opposing political forces, a telling factor when analysing its cultural and political place in presidential history.

To understand the contemporary political milieu and the four archetypes that are explored in this thesis (the grassroots activist, bipartisan unifier, Commander-in-Chief and pop icon), we must examine the recent history of presidential communication and

² Posted by House Democrats on Facebook, available at <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?comments&v=515562117318> (accessed August 10, 2010)

revisit not only Obama's political and ideological past, but also conceptualise the changes in presidential communications brought about by the amalgamation of his political philosophy and networked computer-mediated communications...

...it all began in 2007

On a screen larger than life we can see a woman dressed in a smart red suit, delivering a speech. She is about fifty years old, blond and ostensibly articulate. She moves her hands and lips in a straightforward, elegant manner: it is not hard to guess that she is a consummate communicator. But her audience does not cheer or applaud. Some of them march, flanked by riot police. Most of them just sit there, like cows at the slaughterhouse, gazing into the screen, absent. The room is big as a hangar; and cold, taken from a post-apocalyptic fantasy. The immaculate, unresponsive spectators sit on perfect rows listening to the woman, whose speech is barely audible ("... patriotic people who want to be part of a team..."). Suddenly, another female, an athletic runner of perfect proportions (one cannot escape the parallel: Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*)³, runs towards the screen, aims and throws an Olympic hammer. The speaker is shattered into a million pieces. We hear glass clashing on the floor. A bright light and white dust sprout from the screen as the audience stands in awe. Fade to black: an "O" that resembles the multicoloured Apple Computer logo of the 1980s appears.

Then a slogan: "Vote different". And a website address: barackobama.com

Philip de Vellis, a graphic designer associated with Blue State Digital,⁴ the firm

³ *Olympia* is a propaganda film financed by the Nazi party in which Riefenstahl exalted the perfection of the Aryan human figure and is widely recognised as both a cinematic masterpiece, and a perfect example of propaganda: of art at the service of statism.

⁴ The advertisement was not officially part of Obama's campaign, and its creator was asked to leave his post. Koman, Richard. "'Vote Different' creator had ties to Obama, is fired from his design job". *Silicon Valley Watcher*. March 22, 2007. http://www.siliconvalleywatcher.com/mt/archives/2007/03/vote_different_1.php (accessed April 10, 2010).

responsible for the creation of Barack Obama's website, launched this viral YouTube video (in three years, it has been viewed almost 6 million times). It is a homage to the 1984 Apple "Think Different" advertisement⁵ and depicted Obama's adversary in the Democratic primary race, Hillary Clinton, as a female version of the Orwellian Big Brother.

Recalling this short film, as farfetched and misleading as it might seem, is useful for three reasons. First, it serves as a metaphor for the paradigm shift (as yet not fully realised) in the communication methods of American politics that began to materialise, in the presidential arena, with John McCain's (Republican) and Howard Dean's (Democrat) primary campaigns in 2000 and 2004,⁶ respectively (Hidman, 2009). This has further development with the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008 (Jones & Vassallo, 2008). The predominance of one-to-many communication approaches which were dominant in the broadcasting age –allegorised by Hillary Clinton's image and those pokerfaced citizens– is transforming into a many-to-many model, due to the inclusion of social media and other information technologies in political partisanship, interaction and debate. Just a few months before the *Vote Different* video was released, Obama, the Democratic Party's *wunderkid* since the 2004 National Convention (Atwater, 2007), had made the bold move of announcing his presidential candidacy in a very early stage of his political career, challenging notions of race, expertise and political inclination (his critics pinpointed him as the most liberal

⁵ Directed by filmmaker Ridley Scott 25 years ago. The original can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNy-7jv0XSc> (accessed April 8, 2010). de Vellis' reformulation can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-IMZxjo> (accessed April 10, 2010).

⁶ There is a precedent in a state level. As Anstead and Chadwick note, "as early as 1998, Independent candidate Jesse Ventura won the Minnesota gubernatorial contest (against well-established Democratic and Republican candidates) by using the net to organise and publicise campaign rallies in the hours before polls closed." (2008: 103) It must be noted, however, that he held the advantage of his celebrity as a professional wrestler and radio host.

Senator in US history). As such, he was then considered a long-shot option compared with established candidates Hillary Clinton and the ill-fated John Edwards.⁷ The incorporation of grassroots strategies (later on transferred to online social networking) as a backbone of his campaign apparatus indicated, nevertheless, a new, more inclusive kind of political discourse.

Second, the success of the viral video made evident that through online channels, a citizen could attract media attention, have a say in the political arena (even in the form of controversy) and, ideally, hold the means to communicate with the elite in a more succinct way. A new relationship between citizens and candidates –alongside media, two fundamental nodes in the political network– was beginning to forge, one that escaped the enclosures of unidirectional communication schemes and ventured into multidimensional models.

Third, it was the representation of a politician as part of a group, as a member of an entity bigger than himself: the “I” turned “we”, at least discursively. This movement, which would become Organizing for America, demonstrated an acceptance of the political relevance of the concept of network society. This new paradigm defines not only human communication, but the developed world by enlarge. It is explained by Castells as follows:

“... the key values that were put forward, and that ultimately created a new culture around the world, were three: the value of freedom and individual autonomy vis-à-vis the institutions of society and the power of corporations; the value of cultural diversity and the affirmation of the right of minorities, ultimately expressed in terms of human

⁷ His mention is not gratuitous, as his debacle was prompted by the quick spread of the news about his infidelity through the Internet, the informational backbone of the network society that serves as a theoretical background for this paper. As Castells states in reference to Volkmer (2003): “The enclosure of communication in the space of flexible, interactive, electronic hypertext has a decisive effect on politics. Media have become the public space.” (2009: 30)

rights; and the value of ecological solidarity; that is, the reunification of the interest of the human species as a common good, in opposition to the industrial values of material growth and consumption at all costs.” (2004: 19)

As candidate and, to a lesser-extent, as statesman, Barack Obama embodies the triad of values that define Castells’ network society: his life story is that of an individual who overcame considerable odds (for instance, winning elections given his non-elite background) against the monolithic institutions that reign over American politics and academia (such as the Harvard academic spheres or the United States Senate, of an overwhelmingly white majority); his ethnical background is revolutionary in itself, and for some represents both the “value of diversity” and “the affirmation of the right of minorities”;⁸ and certain policies, particularly Health Care Reform, seek, at least on paper, to defend the interest of the “common good” over “industrial values”.

The audacity to click

Barack Obama’s triumph in the United States 2008 presidential elections represented a turning point in US and world politics for two salient reasons. First, he became the first American president-elect of African-Muslim descent.⁹ Second, he was a pioneer in the use of online informational systems as both communication channels of then unprecedented efficiency (his use of social media, e-mails and SMS alerts is well documented in David Plouffe’s account of the presidential race, *The Audacity to Win*; 2009), and a finely tuned fundraising machine. According to a final tally report

⁸ Throughout his political career, he has emphasized the rights of ethnical, sexual and socioeconomic minorities.

⁹ That, in itself, raised many questions about race and racism in America, until then a taboo in presidential politics. The Internet buzz and heated discussions generated by the candidate’s association with controversial reverend Jeremiah Wright were plentiful. Obama’s speech on racial issues, “A More Perfect Union”, temporarily put these issues, which resurfaced before the 2010 mid-term elections, to rest. A video and a discussion of this can be accessed at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html (accessed April 20, 2010).

published by *The Washington Post*,¹⁰ the candidate raised \$500 million dollars online during his 21-month campaign. This half a billion dollars were accumulated by 6.5 million donations, 6 million of which were in amounts of \$100 dollars or less. Another impressive figure, which evidences the exponential growth of the Democratic Party's database over the past three election cycles: Obama's e-mail list contained 13 million registries, compared to the 3 million John Kerry amassed in the 2004 election and Howard Dean's 600,000 in 2000. As Vargas reflects, Obama ushered "in a new digital era in presidential fundraising." (2008)

Commanded by David Axelrod (his top political advisor) and David Plouffe (campaign manager),¹¹ the Obama campaign appealed to the formation of new communities and the consolidation of existing ones, a model present since the first experiences of online political interaction. Deibert and Rohonski (2008) note the complexity of the expansion of the global civil networks currently inscribed in local and international power systems. They single out, among other factors, "the decline of civil participation in traditional structures of political participation" and "the increase of development [community] initiatives". However, they assert that "there should be no doubt that this expansion also has been the result of the enabling role played by the new media environment, and in particular the growing use of the Internet by civic networks beginning in the 1990s... The medium's constitutive architecture –distributed, decentralized and relatively cheaply and easily employed– fits the organizational and political logics of global civil networks." (125) Obama has appropriated the cumulative

¹⁰ See: Vargas, José Antonio. "Obama Raised Half a Billion online". *The Clickocracy. The Washington Post*. November 20, 2008.
http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html (accessed April 20, 2010).

¹¹ His account of the campaign, where he lays out the blueprints of its digital strategy, can be explored at: Plouffe, David. *The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory*. New York: Viking Adult, 2009.

experience of these global civil networks and put it at work in electoral and presidential communications.

What is more, Obama's political career can serve as a crude allegory of these "global civil networks", as evidenced by the popularity that, even as a candidate, he has garnered throughout the globe (i.e. the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded in 2009, which strengthened his stature as a world leader). As President, he has tried to transfer – sometimes unsuccessfully– the political and ethical legitimacy of those networks to the office he holds. Given his experience in grassroots organisations composed by a collection of "local civil networks" in and around the Chicago area, it came as no surprise that at the beginning of his career, the political discourse of the then Illinois Senator found its core in the move to action from the community. It also established an ultimate home in the online construct, particularly when relating to causes that appeal to social action, such as the move towards universal health care.¹²

In summarising Obama's success in the primary run against Clinton, at one point the clear-cut favourite (2008; before the general election), Anstead and Chadwick emphasise the communal nature of Obama's feat, focusing on the use of social networking tools:

"At some points during the course of his primary campaign, the central website received over a million unique visitors a week. His Facebook group currently has 1.2 million members, while he has nearly half a million friends on MySpace. Obama's YouTube videos have currently been watched 56 million times, with the most viewed video being the 37-minute 'more perfect union' speech on race in Philadelphia, which had, by July 2008, been seen 5.6 million times in its entirety." (2008)

¹² Water recalls the early days of Obama's activism, which is thoroughly explored later in this thesis: "[He] graduated from Columbia University moved to Chicago in 1985 to work for a church-based group seeking to improve living conditions in poor neighbourhoods plagued with crime and high unemployment." (Water, 2007)

Moreover, they single out the involvement of “grassroots political entrepreneurs” like Farouk Olu Aregbe, who created a group on Facebook and within a week had accumulated 200,000 members (Stelter, 2008; Vargas cited in Anstead & Chadwick, 2008). In a *New York Times* article¹³ published a few days before the contest, even Mark McKinnon, a senior adviser in George W. Bush’s 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, stated: “I think we’ll be analyzing this election for years as a seminal, transformative race. The year campaigns leveraged the Internet in ways never imagined. The year we went to warp speed. The year the paradigm got turned upside down and truly became bottom up instead of top down.”

The passive masses portrayed in Philip de Vellis’ viral video started, apparently, to brake free.

Health Care Reform and beyond

The advent of the World Wide Web (particularly its more network oriented applications) had demonstrated the ability of some politicians to benefit from technology more effectively than others. This is evidenced in the McCain-Obama 2008 contest, where Obama accumulated 2,379,102 Facebook friends compared to McCain’s 2,032,993.¹⁴ The use of new informational interactive applications created a performance gap between the new and old political guards, in this case, between the Internet-oriented institutional mechanisms of the Democratic (Hindman, 2009) and the Republican Parties. Today, with another presidential election looming in 2012 and the

¹³ Nagourney, Adam. “The ’08 Campaign: Sea Change for Politics as We Know It”. *The New York Times*. November 3, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/04/us/politics/04memo.html> (accessed May 2, 2010).

¹⁴ In MySpace the proportion was 833,161 to 217,811. A comprehensive, comparative table can be found in: Lorien C. Abrams and R. Craig Lefebvre, “Obama’s Wired Campaign: Lessons for Public Health Communication”. *Journal of Health Communication*, 14:415-423, 2009. Table 1.

mid-term process under way,¹⁵ it is important for researchers interested in the impact of new media developments in political processes to go beyond the Obama candidacy and reflect on the ways in which this paradigm shift will affect future presidential contests, how it has been taken into (or not) the Obama presidency and its capacity to make public policy, and its impact on wider political outcomes and the exercise of power.

Just as the dynamics of campaign politics were transformed by the 2008 experience, so will, one could assume, presidential communications the United States and other countries influenced by its electoral and political practices. It is my hypothesis that the social media is a public sphere, and that the representation of Barack Obama within this public sphere has embodied diverse and divergent roles. This represents a culmination of the process identified by Habermas (1991) in which the figure of rulers shifts from the private to the public sphere. And vice versa. This was evident during the Health Care Reform debate, a critical moment in his presidency, one that has and will define the immediate political landscape of the United States of America.

After offering a brief recount of the presidential communication methods of recent administrations and the origins and nature of Obama's political philosophy these questions are examined. This is done by comparing and contrasting four of the archetypical roles performed by Obama in the discourse contained in the online social media¹⁶ communication efforts channelled through the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the White House (www.whitehouse.gov) and from his grassroots organisation,

¹⁵ The next US presidential election in 2012, however, might present a completely different scenario due to the adoption by the Republican Party of the grassroots strategies employed by the Democrats: the formation of the Tea Party and its online mirrors (www.teapartypatriots.org), among other actions, point in this direction. For a glimpse at what is shaping up to be a major change towards grassroots strategies in the Republican primary election process, see: Tumulty, Karen. "Prominent Republicans making more endorsements in primary races". *The Washington Post*. April 22, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/21/AR2010042105243.html?hpid=topnews> (accessed May 2, 2010).

¹⁶ Internet-based publishing techniques designed to disseminate through social interaction.

Organizing for America (www.barackobama.com).

The archetypal roles identified and employed for the analysis are: grassroots activist, bipartisan unifier, Commander-in-Chief and pop icon. To do this, I performed a semi-structured analysis of the institutional communication content employed in the 2010 campaign for universal health care, before legislation on the Health Care Reform¹⁷ was voted and approved in the United States Congress (January to late March). The analysis focuses on understanding Obama's manifold online persona. It is not my intention, however, to undermine the influence and substance that traditional media like newspapers, television and radio still hold. Computer-mediated social media is isolated for the sole purpose of analysis.

¹⁷ A comprehensive list of the main changes in legislation can be found at <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/03/18/health.compromise.highlights/> (accessed August 13, 2010)

II. Among US presidents, the medium can *really* be the message

“A president either masters a medium or the medium masters him.”

– Martin F. Nolan, “Orwell Meets Nixon” (2005)

Media theorists, scholars and strategists have read, mumbled and chewed (choked?) on it over and over again: “The medium is the message.” This now overused and frequently misemployed notion first coined by Canadian academic Marshall McLuhan (1964 [1994]) can very well encompass, however, the ever-changing nature of political communication. In this thesis, we consider “the medium” to be a *discursive habitat*, as opposed to a mere communication tool. From the newspaper to the film reel to the television set and now the Internet, politicians have adapted the timeliness and nature of their messages to the newest media. In turn, they have been publicly defined them. These media have changed the course of elections –as illustrated by Richard Nixon’s sweaty forehead on the Kennedy debate on September 26th 1960, the first such event to be televised, and the effect of such an image on American voters¹⁸ and even the relationship between presidents and citizens during crisis such as armed conflicts –one could argue that the massive opposition to the Vietnam War was due, in part, to the broadcasting of battlefield images. (Cohen, 2008: 37) The ability to respond in a well-timed and effective manner is the currency by which the arena of presidential communications¹⁹ in the United States and other countries is run. Three elements rely

¹⁸ Analysing the Nixon experience, Martin F. Nolan notes: “In 1960, television betrayed him in the first-ever televised presidential debate against John F. Kennedy. Russell Baker, a reporter for the *New York Times*, covered the event for the tight deadline of his newspaper’s first edition, so he listened to the candidates only on radio. He went to bed convinced that Nixon had won the debate, then, the next day heard the opposite opinion from those who had seen it on television. Nixon’s body language, his beard, and his perspiration proved more memorable than his rhetoric. Thereafter, Nixon still favoured television speeches but shunned televised debates in his presidential campaigns.” (Nolan, 2005)

¹⁹ Cohen argues that “the news media, the public, and the president comprise the three legs of the presidential news system.” (2008: 135)

on the most powerful media in defining contemporary society: the asset of timeliness, the nature of the messages and the means of their transmission. These messages are premeditated by administrative communications bureaucracies: it would be borderline naïve to think that statespersons and other public figures themselves design and implement all communications. The developed world²⁰ now lives in the midst of a networked society, one whose interconnected nature calls for quick responses, where information propagates literally at the speed of light and the juggling of State communications, public awareness over policy issues and attacks from the opposition defines, in a manifold way, the façade of a statesperson's exercise of power.

The response to these communication shifts have not been restricted to candidates in elections: many incumbents have also had to modify at least a fraction of their communication efforts to deal either with the press, the citizens, or both, in the digital flow. In 2007, then British Prime Minister Tony Blair summed up eloquently, in an address to the media, the new set of rules in the relationships among statespersons, media and citizenry:

“... the forms of communication are merging and interchanging. The BBC website is crucial to the modern BBC. Papers have podcasts and written material on the web. News is becoming increasingly a free good, provided online without charge. Realistically, these trends won't do anything other than intensify. These changes are obvious. But less obvious is their effect.

The news schedule is now 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It moves in real time.

²⁰ In this thesis, we accept Castells' notion of a divide between developed and underdeveloped areas of the globe and their relationship with technology: “The architecture of the global economy features an asymmetrically interdependent world, organized around three major economic regions and increasingly polarized along an axis of opposition between productive, information-rich, affluent areas, and impoverished areas, economically devalued and socially excluded.” (Castells, 1996: 145) To generalise political phenomena in the United States and other developed democracies and adapt our findings to countries with divergent political apparatuses could be deemed irresponsible.

Papers don't give you up to date news. That's already out there.

They have to break stories, try to lead the schedules. Or they give a commentary. And it all happens with outstanding speed. When I fought the 1997 election –just ten years ago– we took an issue a day. In 2005, we had to have one for the morning, another for the afternoon and by the evening the agenda had already moved on. You have to respond to stories also in real time.” (Blair, 2007)

Kuhn (2002) argues that even in his first government, which began in 1997, Blair configured his communication apparatus according to these principles, “packaging” information. In turn, journalist began to report on the way government agencies controlled the information flow: “... as part of the increased media attention to political processes as opposed to policy, government news management activities themselves became an integral part of media coverage as journalists unpacked the government’s packaging for their audiences.” (64) Blair was also right in his assertion of the intensification of these media trends. One can only imagine what Blair thinks of the “outstanding speed” in the behaviour of *twitterized* newsrooms!

The institution of the US presidency commands one of the bigger communication apparatus on Earth: an office led by the White House Press Secretary carefully crafts its voice.²¹ As Cronin & Genovese (2009) explain in the third edition of *The Paradoxes of the American Presidency*,²² very few intended or unintended

²¹ In Obama’s case, that job falls in Robert Lane Gibbs, who tweets at @PressSec, who was his communications director in the Senate and during the 2008 campaign.

²² The cover image is telling: Barack Obama delivering his inaugural address flanked by Abraham Lincoln’s statue in Washington D.C. In his autobiographical volume, *The Audacity of Hope*, the then Illinois senator writes about Lincoln’s idea of democracy, which Obama echoes in many respects, particularly in the collaborative approach to government evident in some of his strategies, among them social media efforts. It is also important to note that racial matters were a highlight in both Lincoln’s and Obama’s presidencies. He argues: “[Lincoln] like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation. We remember him for the firmness and depth of his convictions –his underlying opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand.” (Obama, 2006: 97)

messages are left, ideally, to chance. In this book, the authors chronicle three key moments in the American presidency's relationship with communication channels. They argue: "In the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt utilized the 'new' medium of radio to reach out directly to voters. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan effectively used television to bypass the press and go directly to the public. Barack Obama used the 'new' medium of the Web to make a 'direct' connection to voters, closing the gap between candidate and citizen and creating a virtual community of supporters." (Cronin & Genovese, 2009: 69) Note the quotation marks the authors apply to "direct": do they imply that social media might be just an illusion of directedness? I would argue that although this is an increasingly successful but unfulfilled enterprise, as other factors, such as anonymity, come into play.

Obama as the "Geek-in-Chief"

Analysing how the team behind Barack Obama has adapted the Web 2.0 strategies of his campaign to this very complex machinery of the presidency is our interest here. After winning the primary and presidential elections and before his inauguration, Obama started a website, *change.gov*, "to link his presidency to web voters" (*Ibidem*).²³ The site, titled *The Obama-Biden Transition Project*, serves as an example of the paradigm shift. As president-elect, Obama had the unprecedented capacity to continue his direct communication efforts in two fronts. First, he could keep in touch with his voters, many of whom were active members and supporters of his campaign. Second, he could reach across the aisle to his Republican opponents now turned governed citizens.

Social media tools allowed the Obama-Biden team to symbolically exercise

²³ Although the website is no longer updated, its archives can be accessed. It currently redirects the user to thewhitehouse.gov

power before it was officially transferred (for instance, they hosted various forums on diverse policies) and, more importantly, to hold more Web 2.0 channels than those of sitting president George W. Bush.

It is pertinent, then, to delineate the notion of Web 2.0. We ascribe to Beer and Burrows' (in Beer, 2009) definition: "The shift toward user generated content and the move from desktop storage to webtop access". This, as Beer points out, has led to notions such as "empowerment" and "collective intelligence" (*Ibidem*). What is noteworthy, as will be scrutinised in Chapters IV and V, is that the Obama campaign and his ensuing Presidential Press Office have found ways to *read* the nuances of our times and not only adapt their message to the medium (as others, like Nixon or McCain, have tried to do), but to *merge* the message with the medium, its particularities and cultural associations (democracy or empowered individuals, among others).

Media is no longer conceived as communication channels, but as *communicative vessels* that extend from the statesperson to the citizen to the construct of the State. Obama became a user among many: this is the epitome of the McLuhanesque practice, the perfect simulacrum of an idealised democracy in the net.

Digital triumvirate: remediation, produsage, cyberbalkanisation

In order to conceptually conceive this paradigm shift in presidential communications, I will concisely reflect on three concepts which lay out a theoretical canvas for this thesis. President Obama's communications model for the use of social media, and the difference it holds with his predecessors' communication apparatuses, can be conceptualised using the notions of *remediation*, *produsage* and *cyberbalkanisation*. The first two encompass the nature of the communication process present in social media and are, so to speak, positive in their assumptions concerning the exercise of democracy. The third one comes from political science and focuses on the some of the

risks posed by the political uses of the Internet.

Remediation

The first concept orients us to understanding the process and impact of change in communications and its content. The grammar of media channels can overlap in a process of *remediation*: when it comes to media, there is no clear break with past uses and conventions. As Deuze explains: "... every medium diverges from yet also reproduces older media, whereas old media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media." (2006: 68) As such, online social media tools like YouTube and Flickr adhere to the language of television and analogue photography respectively; similarly, podcasts remediate the conventions of broadcast radio; blogs of news bulletins and traditional journalism; Facebook and MySpace of personal advertisements and face-to-face interactions. In addition, vice versa is the case: television programming has adapted some of the Web's lexicon and practices (live Twitter feeds in the news or SMS voting in reality shows) and traditional journalism is increasingly economical in the extension of its pieces, and it tends to base content-making on opinion rather than in hard, proven facts. As will be shown later, Obama has swiftly tailored his different personae in both ends of the *remediation* spectrum that ranges from traditional and *remediated* media and campaigning practices.

Contrary to previous technologies, digital canvases offer more direct forms of interactivity and, most importantly, seemingly endless networking possibilities. A node in the network can connect to any number of nodes in a given environment: the statesman can act as one of those nodes in an evolving horizontal structure, in par with citizens. One of the most significant political capacities of the Internet is the power it potentially gives statespersons to not only *influence* the media, but *also* design,

configure and run *their own* communication channels and, in parallel, portray themselves as champions of deliberative democracy. Web 2.0 applications are also partially free from the ever-subjugating commercialisation of airtime and the high costs of television, radio and film production.

In Western democracies, very seldom does the State fully control, at least not overtly,²⁴ television, newspapers or radio stations to propagate ideological or governmental communications. However, an argument could be made for the presence of a Machiavellian incidence in some cases, like in the management of Republican interests during the Bush presidency and how the agenda was set around the War on Terror, for example, by conservative outlets in the vein of Fox News.²⁵ In the West-dominated mediated discourse, this practice is more commonly associated with what are perceived as repressive, totalitarian regimes.²⁶

In their Propaganda Model, Chomsky and Herman (1988) would argue, however, that the media are unquestionably aligned with the power of the State. As Mullen (2010) indicates, one of the underlying principles of this model is that “where there was consensus amongst the corporate and political elite on a particular issue, the media tended to reflect this in their coverage of that issue, to the exclusion of rival viewpoints.” (675) Since the publication of the Propaganda Model, however, the media in the United States and elsewhere have diversified, and the presence of online outlets (the equivalent to bulletins, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television broadcasters) makes it hypothetically harder to reach such a “consensus”.

²⁴ Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is a notable and controversial exception. He is the owner of the media conglomerate Mediaset, which incorporates three national television channels.

²⁵ See: Cappella, Jamieson. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

²⁶ Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, frequently at odds with the US, recently opened a Twitter account: @chavezcandanga

As a participant in the *remediation* process of presidential communications, the position of the citizen also undergoes a metamorphosis from passive receptor to active participant. However, we must be cautious when assessing the citizenry's willingness to participate. As Davis expresses when summarising his position: "Citizens may not be willing to invest time in the [democratic] process. The kind of citizen involvement envisioned by proponents of Internet democracy requires 'the necessary leisure on the part of the citizen to devote his or her thoughts and time to public questions'." (2005: 138)

In *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009) Hindman singles out the campaign led by Democratic primary candidate Howard Dean in 2004 as a precursor to the Obama phenomenon, and suggest that the latter's way of using the Internet as an instigator of political activity can track its origins back to the campaign led by the former Vermont governor. Dissecting it, moreover, can also shine some light on the nature of the ideal citizen to which online political communications can be directed. When analysing the enthusiasts who invested their time and energy in Howard Dean's²⁷ primary campaign in 2004, a precursor to Obama's in method and form, Hindman notes: "[...] survey suggests that liberals visit political Web sites much more than do moderates or conservatives." And he adds: "Among self-identified Democrats, frequent visitors to political Web sites are dramatically more liberal than the party as a whole."²⁸ He is also questions the real openness of the Internet due to the existence of "powerful hierarchies shaping a medium". These hierarchies include the systems of media oligopolies, as well as pyramidal institutional structures in governments and political parties.

²⁷ Chairman of the Democratic National Committee during the Obama campaign.

²⁸ Reports of the 2000 and 2002 General Social Survey (GSS), as reported in Hindman, Matthew. *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, c2009, p.16

Producersage

If people are involved in the *remediation* of the political discourse in the web, how can this be conceptualised? One useful approach would be Axel Bruns's concept of *producersage*, which foresees a change in the way content is created in various realms like entertainment, academia and politics. In his model, Bruns identifies the "continuous building and extending" of existing content. All, he states, in search of constant improvement. He elaborates: "Users who participate in... processes of massively parallelized and decentralized creativity and innovation in myriads of enthusiast communities do no longer produce content, ideas, and knowledge in a way that resembles traditional, industrial modes of production." (Bruns, 2008)

Although Bruns acknowledges that it is the use of the medium and not the medium itself which can propel political change, he is more optimistic than Hindman: "... *producersage* may drive changes to the democratic system itself—not so much perhaps leading to its casual collapse *per se*, but to a significant reinvigoration of citizen participation in democratic processes which during the mass media age generally took place as acted out in front of, rather than enacted by, citizens." (*Ibidem*, 360) An essential question arises: is Obama a producer or a *producer*? Does Obama's online operations encourage *producersage* among his closest circle and potentially over citizenry in general?

The formation of *producers* goes hand in hand with two forms of political participation identified by Henrik Bang: Expert Citizens and Everyday Makers, categories to which active members of Organizing for America, President Obama's closest collaborators and proactive citizens like Philip de Vellis could belong. As Lin and Marsh (2008) explain, for Bang "citizens are not apathetic; rather, they are alienated

from a political system which does not allow them a ‘real’, that is effective, voice.”

(248) Therefore, Bang argues, contemporary liberal democracies are not characterised by a lack of participation, but by a *different* type of participation. Expert Citizens are individuals outside of formal government structures who have professional policy-making skills and who think that they “can do politics and make and implement policy as well as the old authorities” (2008: 250), but generally are not affiliated to a political party or a formal political structure. On the other hand, Everyday Makers are a response to Expert Citizens. Li and Marsh sum up Bang’s notion:

“Everyday Makers do not feel defined by the state; they are neither apathetic about, nor opposed to, it. They do not want to waste time getting involved with the state; they prefer to be involved at the lowest possible, local, level. Everyday Makers typically think globally, but act locally. They have no interest in producing a new form of interest representation and have minimal interest in party politics. They are also sceptical of new Expert Citizens because they pursue their own interests... [Everyday Makers] are not driven by a sense of duty, nor are they interested in gaining influence; rather, they wish to feel involved and develop themselves. They aim to encourage what Bang terms ‘small local narratives’.” (251)

The army of volunteers, who have worked for the Obama project both during the primary and presidential campaigns and in support of his presidential agenda in issues like the Health Care Reform, can fall into this category. These Everyday Makers are active in grassroots efforts both on the ground and in online informational networks.

Cyberbalkanisation

The final concept we will define is *cyberbalkanisation*, that is, the presence of *balkanisation* in the networked informational milieu. *Balkanisation* is defined as: “The division of a state into smaller territorial units. The term tends to imply a policy of ‘divide and rule’, whereby the strength of a united country is diluted by the creation of internal division. The term came to prominence in the aftermath of the First World War, but has contemporary resonance in the light of recent Balkan politics.”²⁹

Some academics like Cappella directly apply this concept to the proliferation of political content in the World Wide Web. In his indictment of the conservative media establishment in the United States, *Echo Chamber*, Capella replicates the concerns of others (Cass Sunstein, 2001; Elihu Katz, 1996 ; and Joseph Turow, 1997), in that segmented and partisan content in the web can lead to the “polarization of public opinion” and the “balkanization of knowledge and understanding”. That is: the distortion of information in a systematic way, in a manner consistent with the source’s rhetoric, can create a “polarized view of political phenomena.” (Cappella, 2008: 192) He applies this notion to analyse the rhetoric of ultraconservative media personality Rush Limbaugh, but we might very well expand his findings and employ them to judge all partisan political communication, including Obama’s endorsement of the Democratic Party’s ideological stances and policies.

On the other hand, Castells references Putman (2000) to define *cyberbalkanisation* as “a way to accentuate the dissolution of social institutions and the decline of the civic engagement” at large in the Internet. (2001: 132) In *Going Local*:

²⁹ “Balkanization” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*. Ed Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan. Oxford University Press 2009. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Sydney University. 3 May 2010
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t86.e98>>

Presidential Leadership in the Post-Broadcast Age (2009), Cohen identifies a similar occurrence:

“The context theory of presidential leadership styles argues that in the current age of polarized parties and fragmented media, presidents still go public, but differently than in the age of individual pluralism. Rather than focus their energies on the mass public writ broadly, presidents have shifted much of their leadership efforts to narrower segments of the public, in particular their party base, interest groups and localities.”
(Cohen, 2008: 35)

This leads to a question. As President, and in his possibly numerous archetypal roles in the Internet, does the use of social media by Barack Obama, due to the nature of the medium itself and not necessarily through a conscious decision, promote a *cyberbalkanisation* of the American public by addressing only a fragment of the population?

If we are to analyse the representations of Barack Obama in the digital realm –as an individual, a symbol(s) and the materialisation of an idea(s)–, and his interactions as “statesperson” with the “citizens” and the “State” he leads and represents (in the United States and overseas), we must briefly address how the most recent occupants of the Oval Office –Reagan, Bush, Clinton and George W. Bush– have configured some of the key messages of their presidencies so as to overview how the symbolic position of “President of the United States” has functioned, as a participant in a constantly changing communication process, under the diverse, overlapping and sometimes conflicting processes of *remediation*, *produsage* and *cyberbalkanisation*.³⁰

³⁰ See Tables 1 (p. 37) and 2 (p. 48) for a summary on how these processes aid in the construction of each of the archetypes.

From Reagan to Obama: striving to fulfil the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE

Examining the manner in which White House communication teams have constructed the image of its leaders in recent history allows us to historicise the nature of the Obama presidential online apparatus and contextualise how “he” made use of social media during the debate over the Health Care Reform. As preparation for the textual analysis of Obama’s different roles in the online discursive arena, we will start to conceive statespersons as *symbols* that work in conjunction with other *symbols* in a system of *signification* (Eco, 2005), in which some archetypical roles emerge. Under the circumstances defined by this thesis, these archetypical roles are exclusive to the American political arena. When we talk about “presidents” we are not referring to a single individual, but to the communication output of the presidents’ teams and the cultural *connotations* adhered to his persona. To this end I first present a case that dates a few presidencies back and provides the backdrop for this concise timeline.

In the short story “Lyndon”, David Foster Wallace narrates an advisor’s experience in the team of Democrat Lyndon Johnson, as he moved from Senate office to Oval Office –a period stained by the loses of the Vietnam War and the confrontational atmosphere that formed between the president and some fractions of the population. Initially, the aide is given a task his superiors describe as that of a “mailman”: he is supposed to deliver citizen’s missives to Johnson’s desk:

““The senator places great importance on communication with citizens and constituents at all times’, Dora Teane told me. I was handed an index card. Its heading, bold-face, read SAME DAY DIRECTIVE. ‘It is an office regulation for the staff that every piece of mail the Senator receives must be answered the same day it came in.’” (Wallace, 1997)

This passage is helpful because it moves us to reflect on the fact that through social media Obama can possibly do what Johnson failed to do as Commander-in-Chief (1961-1963). Today, the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE at the presidential level is, provided a vast communications team and bypassing the element of anonymity, within a click's length. In the dawn of his political career Johnson intended to create a strong bond with the people he represented, just like Obama: that was possible when he was serving as a member of the Senate, but unfeasible in the highest office of the United States government because of the obvious difference in magnitude.³¹ Johnson went through a similar experience to the one Tony Blair described in regards of the network society. The trepid rhythm of the television and satellite communications surge transformed the way in which Johnson perceived and was forced to tackle the timeliness and nature of the messages directed at and from the citizens: the communication model was turned upside-down, revolutionized, revamped, *remediated*. Before he could apply the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE on a larger scale, images of dead Vietnamese children and wounded American soldiers were flooding the pages of LIFE magazine and fuelling antiwar protests from TV sets. Johnson failed blatantly when it came to respond to the *remediation* that the media environment had undergone. Thanks to social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook and tools in both the Organizing for America and White House websites, Obama can follow more extensively, 40 years later, the mandate of a SAME DAY DIRECTIVE in his official and unofficial institutional messages.

³¹ By the end of his short presidency, Johnson was perceived as distanced from the US public, never the real deal but always "the substitute", in part due to the insurmountable figure of his slain predecessor but mainly because of the way he led the war in Vietnam: "Just when the public was lulled into a false sense of complacency and security concerning the benevolence of presidential power, however, the war in Vietnam and the reaction against it caused everyone to rethink our assumptions... As U.S. involvement escalated, and as victory seemed further and further away, blame was placed squarely on the shoulders of President Johnson." (Cronin & Genovese, 2009: 122)

The manner in which White House officials and party strategists *try* to construct the everyday *narrative* of presidential communications is shaped, among other factors, by the intricacies of the channels they control and the way the media reports on the presidency. Citizens' perception is constructed by a combination of diverse factors: presidents have to act along those lines. As Han points out: "White House communication strategy consists of various components, including the leadership style of the president, presidential rhetoric and speechwriting, presidential public activities, the presidential policy agenda, and the presidential/press relationship... An effective presidential communication strategy can be a critical factor, at least for presidents since the emergence of the television age, in developing and implementing the administration's policy goals." (Han, 2006:119).

The power balance implied by such arrangement is not without its critics. In his analysis of the role of more recent media (24-hour news channels and the Internet), Cohen perceives that "the news media are no longer as consequential in helping to frame public opinion toward the president as they were a generation ago." (2008: 2); alternatively, Roderick Hart is decisive in his indictment of the president's power and ability to speak his/her mind: "To speak is to be a power monger... All speech is not created equal. The speech of presidents is more powerful than most. This power derives in part from the office of the presidency, but it also derives from the attitudes presidents have toward the speech act itself." (in Genovese & Han, 2006: 123)³² What are the

³² Their book *The Presidency and the Challenge of Democracy* is an interesting counterpart to the literature that exalts the presidential institution. The book was written during George W. Bush's presidency, where the authors identified a trend: "We find ourselves today on the precipice of stage three, with President Bush fighting a war against terrorism that takes Truman's constitutionally baseless doctrine one giant step further. Not only does Bush claim an inherent constitutional right to send troops into combat without congressional approval, but he asserts an even more farfetched and dangerous power: that his actions are nonreviewable. If the Congress, public, and courts allow such an assertion to become doctrine, what becomes of the system of checks and balances? Is the president to be truly above the law? This transforms our imperial presidency into a monarchical presidency." (Genovese & Han, 2006: ix) Obama has received such accusations from his political adversaries.

“attitudes” Obama’s recent predecessors have had and how do they influence his archetypal roles?

1. Ronald Reagan (1981-1989): the All-American president

If we were to draw a parallel between Barack Obama and a recent American president in terms of their iconic stature and transformational drive, Ronald Reagan is a good comparison. Like Obama, Reagan was skilled in relating to professional media, his supporters and his critics, a legacy from his years as a Hollywood actor. He was one of the driving forces behind the end of the Cold War, attempted to build cross-party support for his policies (like Obama intends to do) and was admired by some Democrats (the term “Reagan Democrat” was popularised in Washington). Bjerre-Poulsen argues that “Reagan embodied the promise of partisan realignment” (2008: 213). He diligently evaded popular scorn even if he faced grave accusations in scandals like the Iran-Contra affaire³³ and embodied the excesses of imperialist capitalism, as accounted by Noam Chomsky in *Deterring Democracy* (1992).

The journalist Dan Rather exalts Reagan’s communication skills stating that during his political career “the current period of great change in media was only just getting underway” and that “this small bit of good timing combined well with professional gifts of communication [enabled him] to convey externally the unique and large piece of the America psyche that resided within him.” (2008: 26) Rather adds: “Ronald Reagan, without question, furthered and perhaps fundamentally changed our public understanding of what a president is and should be. And in terms of the *imagery* of the presidency, he continued the evolution of the television presidency that had first emerged with the telegenic Kennedy years.” (*Ibidem*). The small screen served as a

³³ Reports claimed that the Reagan administration sold arms to Iran, despite an embargo, and used the profit to finance the Contra guerilla movement in Nicaragua.

portal through which, in the eyes of the American public, Reagan became approachable. The role First Lady Nancy Reagan played in furthering his husband's communications, or tackling other agendas such as anti-drug messages, could be material for interesting research into the roles First Ladies play in construction a statesman's persona (a parallel between her efforts and Michelle Obama's campaign against child obesity can be drawn). Barack Obama has followed Reagan's in the construction of the *imagery* of the presidency, a semantic architecture supported, contrary to Reagan's limited media outlets, by a vast array of networked informational systems.

2. *George H.W Bush (1989-1993): Operation Desert Storm as a spectacle*

The election of Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, was a ratification of sorts for the president (Corrigan, 2008), who was the Republican Party's choice in 1980, when Bush first intended to run for office. Vice-president under Reagan and former Director of the CIA, he was the orchestrator of many of the foreign affairs issues that marked the Reagan years, not only the ones perceived as positive (diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union), but also the vast "underground" interventionist activities throughout the Third World (Central America and the Middle East mainly).

Bush had a wobbly start in terms of approval ratings. (Corrigan, 2008) But the most pressing matter of his presidency consolidated his image as a strong leader. CNN and other cable news channels provided a 24-hour coverage of the First Gulf War, and Bush's team delivered constant and clear messages related to the development of the conflict between Allied forces and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Presidential and Pentagon decisions were communicated via daily addresses to the millions of spectators glued to television sets: the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE was fulfilled.

In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) Baudrillard described the mediated narrative of the war as a *simulacrum*, accusing that the Western world was detached

from the human suffering showcased in millions of televisions across the globe. He defined simulation as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994: 1). Bush constructed a mediatised (explicitly constructed by the media) mythology of the war as spectacle that relates to the concept of *hyperreal* and is *manufactured*, rather than reported, by the media. It was founded upon a vast oligopolistic network of print, television and radio outlets: the mythology was so strong, that it survived the Clinton years and persisted through George W. Bush’s two terms. Since then, this network has amplified, and forms a mosaic that has replicated the *imagery* associated with Obama, created by avid supporters and fierce critics alike.

One could say Bush was successful in creating a mediatised image of his presidency, in both the national and international spheres. In *American Royalty*, Corrigan reflects on the power embodied by the Bush and Clinton families: “The Bush’s administration diplomacy was so good that the administration convinced Israel to stay out of the war even after Iraqi missiles attacked Israeli cities. He had done all this with approval from the UN [United Nations]. The American military had performed brilliantly and George Bush could point to a ‘New World Order.’ He was also seen as politically invincible. His approval ratings went up to an astounding 90 percent.” (Corrigan, 2008: 75-76). This reference to George Bush is important because it set the tone for the political spectacle, with its heroes and villains –it is *hyperreal*– in which the political sphere would play out in an increasingly mediatised society.

3. *Bill Clinton (1993-2001): celebrity extraordinaire*

Clinton is an interesting case: his leadership style and the way he interacted with the media are, like Reagan’s, direct predecessors of the communications of Barack Obama. Even though his personal life incited “negative and tabloid-style news coverage” since the primary race (Han, 20067: 125), and that this trend continued after he left the White

House, Clinton managed to be portrayed positively by the media due to his incontestable charisma. His approval rating, interestingly, didn't fault either, even though he faced the possibility of impeachment as a consequence of his personal indiscretions (Cohen, 2008).

Han explains: "Clinton's presidential leadership style was often defined by the ability of his media advisors—as well as his own skills at public persuasion—to perpetually spin out of trouble with both the press and the public. An important aspect of Clinton's communication strategy included the use of 'new media' outlets—often sidestepping traditional news outlets (including the White House press corps) to speak more directly to the American people through cable news talk shows, regional news conferences with local television and radio stations, and various other forms of electronic town hall meetings." (2006: 125) Images of Clinton playing the saxophone or chatting with celebrities flooded the public's imagination.

The similarity between the "pop icon" version of Clinton and the current iconography of President Obama is noteworthy.

4. George W. Bush (2001-2009): flirting with disaster

Han (2006) eloquently describes Clinton's successor, George W. Bush as "a fascinating study of a mediocre communicator who has nonetheless found his public voice" and shows surprise at the fact that he was "still [able to] succeed in a political environment in which the president is expected to adopt the 'permanent campaign' strategy of governing." (126) After the fatal events of 9/11, Bush underwent a transformation in his communication style: his rhetoric, previously deemed as timid, was increasingly concise and was widely discussed due to his hyperbolic and strange wording. In the popular imagination he was perhaps as much of a pop icon as Clinton was and Obama would

become.³⁴

The presidency of George W. Bush was punctuated by iconic, dramatic images that will remain forever imprinted in the memory of the 21st century and were distributed by television and the Internet: “Worldwide television broadcasts on April 9 featured the moment when Iraqi citizens in central Baghdad toppled a 40-foot statue of Saddam Hussein—with the help of U.S. Marines. The dramatic event symbolized the fall of the Iraqi dictator’s regime.” (*Ibidem*, 143) Another episode that can be described as *hyperreal* occurred in May 1, 2003, when the President delivered the “Mission Accomplished” speech on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* to declare the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq. Bush arrived to the carrier onboard a fighter plane, dressed in a flight suit (the image was not unprecedented in popular culture: in the movie *ID4*, Bill Pullman’s President Thomas J. Whitmore is a Vietnam veteran who repels an alien invasion dressed in the same way). This carefully staged televised moment (what historian Daniel J. Boorstin would call a *pseudo event*; 1962) is also an exemplar of the use of the Commander-in-Chief archetype by the presidential institution, as well as of its military connotations.

Moreover, as Souley and Wicks state, his use of online tools such as blogging during the 2004 re-election campaign against John Kerry was surprisingly efficient and, with messages like “Right War, Right Time, Right Man”, helped reaffirm the image of Bush as an experienced leader in a time of tribulation. With the help of political strategist Karl Rove (present in both of Bush’s terms), and in the vein of his father’s communication style, Bush constructed a worldview in black and white, with its heroes and wrongdoers. His communication style, one that alludes to the spectacle, was evident even when he ran to be governor of Texas in 1994: “Rove emphasized: ‘It’s better to

³⁴ There are a number of critical renditions of his persona, from Michael Moore’s biased documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) to the cartoon *Lil Bush* (2007) and Oliver Stone’s biopic *W.* (2008).

narrowcast’ powerful messages targeted at small groups, without stirring up the larger public.” (Swansbrough, 2008: 60) Words like “evil”, “good”, “God” and “bless” were constant in his speeches and resonated with the conservative establishment. He was adored and hated in equal measures: for some he symbolised the crumbling ideals of the United States and interventionism at its highest, for others, he was a fatherly-next-door-neighbour figure. In that sense, as a lawyer, author, Harvard scholar and former University professor, Barack Obama also holds the intellectual legitimacy that his predecessor, George W. Bush, lacked overall. George W. Bush and his political heirs (i.e Tea Party’s Sarah Palin and Glen Black) promote *cyberbalkanisation* at its fullest.

	Processes	Predecessors
Grassroots activist	<i>remediation, produsage,</i> SAME DAY DIRECTIVE	NA
Bipartisan unifier	<i>cyberbalkanisation</i>	Ronald Reagan
Commander-in-Chief	<i>remediation,</i> <i>cyberbalkanisation, SAME</i> DAY DIRECTIVE	Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush
Pop icon	<i>produsage, remediation</i>	Bill Clinton, George W. Bush

Table 1. Keys to understanding the archetypical personae of Barack Obama.

III. Organizing for America: grassroots for the digital age

Organizing for America (www.barackobama.com) represents the social media backbone of Barack Obama's communications strategy. The organisation's influence extends farther than electoral politics: during the Obama presidency it has been the social movement organisation for campaigns that aim to influence both policy-making processes such as the Financial Regulatory and Health Care Reforms, and mid-term elections (Vote 2010). Organizing for America (OFA) is a project of the Democratic National Committee (the organisation that runs logistics of the Democratic Party and provides support for its candidates), and is the basis for some of the strategies conceived by the Party. For this analysis, it is important to briefly describe the ideological and strategic bridge that brings together Barack Obama's political awakening in the 1990s and the Web 2.0 strategies his teams use to construct his online *personae*. As we will see, the confection of Obama as the embodiment of an ideology is consistent with his political principles and the contemporary communications milieu.

As Obama's presidential campaign started to gain momentum, Joe Rospars wrote the first entry for the OFA blog on February 8th 2007: "As we put together the final pieces of the puzzle that is launching a new grassroots-driven web site, I can only say that I hope you're as excited as he was about the opportunities you have here to take this campaign into your own hands". This online hub is not authored by Obama himself, but by a collection of contributors (we can assume, as will be explored in the analytical section of this paper, that the same holds true for this Twitter and Facebook accounts). As for who helps strengthen OFA, in whom does this bottom-top message resonates, we can consider the notion of the amalgamation of diverse global and local civil networks under Obama's wing. Everett argues that "Obama was able to mobilize a throng of technology-savvy young grassroots activists who cut their political teeth on the ill-fated

2004 Howard Dean presidential campaign and were now ready to flip the political script and take a huge bite (or byte) out of the 2007–08 political and media establishments.”

(2009: 195) She adds that “the 2008 presidential election outcome became the *real politik* manifestation of the insistent ‘power to the people’ imperative advanced by 1960s era Civil Rights Movement activists.” (*Ibidem*) To those already committed Democrats, we can add a collection of Everyday Makers that have supported OFA’s initiatives.

OFA describes itself as “the successor organization to Obama for America,³⁵ [which] is building on the movement that elected President Obama by empowering communities across the country to bring about our agenda of change.” Of the various options the website provides citizens to get involved, we can single out, due to their all-encompassing nature, the following: “joining grassroots OFA campaigns to support the President’s agenda” and “spreading the word to friends and neighbours about the President’s approach on the big issues facing our nation, like health care, energy and education”. On the bottom of every page lays a slogan: “Powered by HOPE and supporters like you”. In the website, American citizens can, among other specific actions, make donations, buy memorabilia, volunteer and connect to other social media tools, not only Twitter and Facebook, but also MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, BlackPlanet, Glee, MiGente, AsianAve or LinkedIn, to name a few.

“Grassroots driven”, “empowering communities” and “agenda”: this trio of concepts stands out as the driving force imbedded in the media architecture through which Obama communicates to his supporters from channels not formally part of to the presidential institutional apparatus, and that go hand in hand with the nature of the Web 2.0 informational systems. The first pair relates to networked participation, to the

³⁵ The 2008 presidential campaign that led the Obama to the White House.

enrolment, formation and action of Expert Citizens, *producers* and Everyday Makers. The third concept directs us to the equivalent of the mass media agenda in the online milieu: *buzz*. Harrison and Barthel outline the canvas in which OFA operates: “The popularity of Web 2.0 applications demonstrates that, regardless of their levels of technical expertise, users can wield technologies in more active ways than had been apparent previously to traditional media producers and technology innovators. Users build and maintain social networks, they tag and rank information in ‘folksonomies’ and become deeply involved in immersive virtual web experiences. They do all these things in collaboration, pooling knowledge and constructing content that they share with each other, which is subsequently remixed, redistributed and reconsumed.” (2009: 157)

Everett relates this milieu to Obama’s online aura: “Something remarkable was in the offing when the telegenic and highly Photoshoppable visual presence of Presidential Candidate Barack Obama intersected with a newly configured and powerfully influential participatory digital public sphere emerging in social networks online.” (2009: 194) This visual presence was further expanded by iconic images produced by news agencies, campaign and White House staff and artists. Among them, possibly the most notable is the “Hope poster” designed by Shepard Fairey, an emblem adopted by the campaign.

All roads lead to Chicago

Why is Obama’s political discourse so readily echoed in this “immersive virtual web experiences”? Because of his stated political pragmatism and belief in the transformative power of communities. In 1990, long before he was even considered a senatorial hopeful and was but a Harvard-educated community organiser in Chicago’s inner city, Obama wrote an article, “Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner

City”. The paper dealt with his conception of grassroots organisation methods, which a decade later would be applied to the structures of his political online apparatus, both as a candidate and as a presidential policy advocate. Obama, then working in the betterment of black communities, recognised three obstacles that needed to be surmounted in order to find “a way to merge various strategies for neighbourhood empowerment”. He analysed them as follows:

“(1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership –and not one or two charismatic leaders– can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.” (Obama, 1990)

Power to implement, common vision, local leadership and organisation of people and money: the four factors theoretically made possible by the networked communications that permeated both the Obama ‘08 campaign and his communications from the White House and OFA during the Health Care Reform debate.³⁶ When in the article Obama writes about “plain folk [that] have been able to access the levers of power, and [that] a sophisticated pool of local civic leadership has been developed” (1990), he might very well be addressing the citizen base on which Organizing for America rests. When he argues that the model grassroots organisation “enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other, to reshape their mutual values and expectations and rediscover the possibilities of acting collaboratively”, one can see how

³⁶ His record numbers in online fundraising and the array of supporters he garnered from diverse ethnical, socioeconomic and regional backgrounds are an evidence of this.

these concepts have been applied to the later practices of Internet activism. He also writes about uniting “churches, block clubs, parent groups and any other institutions in a given community”. During the now legendary “Yes We Can” speech,³⁷ pronounced after he lost the primaries in New Hampshire to Hillary Clinton, he addressed “the textile worker in Spartanburg”, “the dishwasher in Las Vegas”, “the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon” and “the boy who learns on the streets of LA” (Obama, 2008). Constant references to everyday citizens have been one of the main tropes of Obama’s political career. During the battle for Health Care Reform, for example, a Flickr gallery showed a vast array of citizens of all ages championing the reform under the slogan “Who are you fighting for?”.³⁸ The video sells the idea of citizen solidarity via a collaborative medium and is an exemplar of both *produsage* and *balkanised* fragmentation in the sense that it divides the population between those who support the reform, and those who doesn’t.

Even in 1990, ignorant of his future stature as world leader, Obama recognised the importance of using channels that enable direct communication with constituents: “Our thinking about media and public relations is equally stunted when compared to the highpowered direct mail and video approaches successfully used by conservative organizations like the Moral Majority.” (Obama, 1990) Many years later, Obama’s team co-opted these strategies and updated them, as the more liberal end of the political spectrum is now associated with the social media revolution. Marez states that: “If, as

³⁷ The mantra of the speech, “Yes We Can”, became Obama’s campaign slogan and a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Musician will.i.am composed a song and created a music video in which many Hollywood celebrities like Scarlett Johansson endorsed the candidate. The video –an exemplar of *bricolage*, “the recreation of objects with materials to hand, re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces” (Deuze, 2006: 70)– has been viewed 20,970,932 in YouTube (as of August 1, 2010). The video is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>. The speech is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe751kMBwms>

³⁸ These photos can be examined at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/barackobamadotcom/sets/72157623521613817/show/>

Rogin (1987) suggested, Ronald Reagan's popularity depended on the projection of his image on the mass media screen, Obama's is supported by proliferating and converging new media screens and platforms." (2009: 219) Others are more cynical and criticise Obama's iconic nature in popular culture, fed by digital activism. Kellner argues that "in terms of stagecraft and spectacle [Bush's legacy resonates here], Obama's daily stump speeches on the campaign trail, his postvictory and even defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots Internet and cultural support have shown that Obama is a master of the spectacle." (2009: 718)

In conclusion, we can rely on the comprehensive dissection of Obama's political philosophy performed by Schultz, who affirms that by "bringing together the hope and idealism of the community organizer and the sophistication and strategizing of a seasoned (perhaps lightly seasoned) Chicago politician, Obama does indeed seek believable change—a grassroots, bottom-up revitalization of American democracy, built on the spirit of service and the many efforts of the many, duly aided by the more far-sighted elites." (Schultz, 2009: 129) What Schultz implies, is that, as Hindman (2009) proposed, networked political communications are not without hierarchies. He elaborates, though, that "the ruthless appropriation... of the grass roots mobilizing of the community organizing tradition, but without the opposition to or disdain for electoral politics, are suggestive of the creative reconstruction that Obama represents" (160) This reconstruction is materialised in Organizing for America and the *remediation* of White House communications.

IV. Obama's *facebooksphere* and *twittersphere* during the Health Care Reform debate

To analyse the presence of a multifaceted personality in the social media construct we call “Barack Obama”, in this chapter I will describe four of the archetypal roles he holds in the discursive arena, as framed by his social media communications through Facebook and Twitter. His embodiment of these archetypes is analysed in terms of the processes of *remediation*, *produsage* and *cyberbalkanisation*, and of the reiterated behaviours of his predecessors outlined in Chapter III and summarised in Table 1 on page 37. On the one hand will define archetypes as a set of characteristics that are universal in Obama's social media communications and delineate a certain behavioural pattern, and, on the other and more importantly, as traits perceived in a similar way by a vast collection of individuals (his “audience”).³⁹

Hobson (cited by Gray 1996) states that for an archetype to be present, “a theme must be isolated clearly enough to recognize it as a typical phenomenon, i.e. a particular motif must recur in the imagery of different individuals” and that “the motif must have a similar context and functional meaning whenever it occurs.” (72) The American Presidency, perhaps the most public and publicised office in the Western world, has been a stage for a variety of ceremonies that appeal to different archetypal roles. Hart (1987) studied the rituals imbedded in the presidency, such as the signing of bills, and reflected on the importance that public showings have in the formation not only of a president's image of leadership, but also of his capacity to actually lead thanks to validation from the citizenry, which recognises archetypal figures. Baudrillard is harsh

³⁹ I divert from the Jungian conception of archetypes, of a more ritualistic and psychoanalytical nature.

in his assessment: "... the American institution of the presidency is much more thrilling in this regard [the rituals of power] than the European: it surrounds itself with all the violence and vicissitudes of primitive powers, of savage rituals." (1997: 25)

Through a concise reading of OFA's and White House's institutional communications, and taking into consideration both the *grand* narrative of the American presidency and Obama's unique political journey, I identified concurrent motifs and symbols that relate to the four archetypes that I consider the most prominent during the first half of his presidency and that have appeared not only during the Health Care Reform debate, but also in Obama's interventions in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the British Petroleum oil spill. It is important to note that of these archetypes only one, the grassroots activist, is unprecedented in the presidential realm, and that the rest (particularly the Commander-in-Chief) bring with them *expectations* based on the rituals of the presidency, on his status as leader within the Democratic Party, and on the way that Obama's predecessors have performed. As Han points out, presidents "are, after all, the steward of the people, the commander-in-chief, and the embodiment of American strength and national unity both at home and abroad." (2006:120)

Barack Obama's meteoric ascendance and controversial character is well documented,⁴⁰ and it reveals a multifaceted personality that can and will adapt to different circumstances. Obama seems to be equally at home with Everyday Citizens and high-ranking politicians and businessmen, with folk and royalty, with factory workers and senators or world leaders. Contrary to other politicians who possess discursive gifts but lack a mediated presence (i.e. Washington aristocracy like John

⁴⁰ I recommend the reading of a new, thorough biography, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, written by David Remnick (New York: Knopf, 2010).

Kerry), Obama is able to present different personae for different audiences under different circumstances.

To analyse the archetypes I identified after a detailed reading of Obama's social media communications from January to the 22nd of March, I sampled specific messages from his Twitter and Facebook accounts. This pair of social media applications was chosen because they serve as *communication vessels* between them and among other multimedia applications. These include Vimeo, YouTube, Twitpic and Flickr, which, although having some social media capacities, in this case more often serve the role of content *containers*. For the purposes of this thesis, I do not make a comparison with the parallel use of traditional media like television or radio by the Obama apparatus, but the relevance of these should not be underestimated, nor should we hold a simplistic view in which political communications happen only either face-to-face or through computer interfaces.

Messages were selected for analysis according to their relevance in particular events during the Health Care Reform debate. Chosen messages were then filtered through specific search terms. The selected messages quoted below, therefore, represent a sample of *lei motifs*. Together, these key thematic elements of the social media communication content of the White House (TWH) and Organizing for America (OFA) lay out an *argumentative map*: along its lines, the Health Care Reform (HCR) proposal and the different strategies to champion its approval among citizens and incumbents were presented. It is important to note that the Facebook network from OFA's account is considerably larger than The White House's (11,891,086 versus 678,095; as of August 5, 2010), which is reflected in the number of "Like" activations and user comments. The same holds true in Twitter: @barackobama has 4,896,023 followers, while @whitehouse only 1,806,568. This sheds a doubt on the partial success of the

translation of Obama's social media strategies and community building from electoral to presidential politics, and reaffirms Hindman's notion on regards to the nature of the politically-involved cybercitizen. It also speaks of the presence of a certain degree of *cyberbalkanisation* in regards to the fragments of the citizenry alluded to through these media.

The archetypes employed in this analysis are:

Archetype	Search terms	Characteristics
1. The grassroots activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • civil rights • call • write • action • neighbours • pledge • community • town hall meeting • us • we • <p>Salient processes: <i>remediation, produsage.</i></p>	<p>More overtly aligned with the agenda of the Democratic Party. Discursively, includes citizens in the decision-making processes and implementation of actions. Recalls the grassroots and civil rights political traditions.</p>
2. The bipartisan unifier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Republican • Democrat • bipartisan • dialogue • sharing • meeting • across the aisle • both parties • <p>Salient processes: <i>cyberbalkanisation, produsage.</i></p>	<p>Issues calls to share and debate ideas from the two main parties in the United States. As a reminiscence of his years in the Senate, Obama communicates with political personalities from both ends of the political spectrum.</p>

3. The Commander-in-Chief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President • President Obama • The White House • Oval Office • research • figures • studies • Army • Secretary • Official White House Photograph • <p>Salient process: <i>remediation</i>.</p>	<p>Military and patriotic symbols of the US presidency, such as flags and armament, are shown. The President is portrayed as someone who relies on hard data to make decisions. The President's image as an international leader is also promoted.</p>
4. The pop icon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visit • celebration • picture of the day • family • dog • First Lady • <p>Salient process: <i>remediation</i>.</p>	<p>Importance placed on the President's relationship with celebrities and family life at the White House. The iconic, inspirational imagery of the First Family is staged and reproduced.</p>

Table 2. Characteristics of archetypical figures embodied by Barack Obama.

These four archetypes (by far, 1 and 2 are the most salient during this period, and are given the most attention) are presented in conjunction with the section *The role of other actors in crafting Obama's "voice"*. These include First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sibelius.⁴¹ Because of the immediacy of social media and its fragmented nature, the messages conducted through these instances can overlap and even contradict each other (while conducting bipartisan

⁴¹ Women in powerful positions, like the one occupied by Sibelius, Hillary Clinton or Supreme Court Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, have been a constant in the narrative of the Obama presidency.

discussion efforts from The White House, for instance, Obama can engage in an indictment of the Republican Party through OFA, therefore moving from one end to the other of the *cyberbalkanisation* spectrum).

Although an analysis that favours a chronological retelling of the events and how Obama communicated throughout these is also possible (a succinct timeline is provided, however, in Appendix A), as is a dissection channel by channel (perform a discursive and performative scrutiny of all Twitter messages, for example), I favoured the option of defining the nature of the archetypes and then ascribing different instances in which each one was more prominent. A quantitative approach is also possible, but although interesting data could be drawn from exhaustive spreadsheets, the qualitative method can be revelatorier in terms of detailed content interpretation.

It is important to note that neither the Facebook feeds nor the Twitter updates seem to be written by the same person and/or entity. There are numerous grammatical and discursive variations and errors that suggest a multitude of authors (*producers*, under Bruns' terms, albeit very specific *producers*, members of Obama's inner circle; in this case, very seldom do citizens in general fall into this category). Sometimes the messages are written in first person, from Obama's point of view and voice. At others, particularly in the calls-for-action, a second person stand is chosen and the reader (a citizen, in general; a supporter or voter, in particular) is addressed directly. From both entities, more informative, straight-to-the-point communications are written in third person and, as described below, coincide with Obama's more presidential, executive messages. Due to the length restrictions in Twitter (140 characters per message), these resemble telegraphic messages, although their reach is far larger. Through *hashtags*—a tagging technique used to make a text searchable and identifiable— such as #hcr and mentions to other Twitter feeds from the Democratic Party and OFA's state operations

(@OFA_AL, for instance), Obama’s *twittersphere* extends to other participants of the wider *twittersphere*.

Additionally, sometimes Obama is referred to as “President Obama”, at others, plainly as “Obama”. I am inclined to rule out the possibility of a single author, and accept the feeds as collaborative communication efforts from aides and other staff members. In once instance, on March 11, The White House Facebook feed published posts by Jerry Lee, a member of The White House new media team who chronicled one of Obama’s town hall meetings (see Figures 1 and 2). This brings White House communications to a different level of horizontality, which means that more members of the team have a say in the construction and propagation of institutional messages.



Figure 1. A member of the White House new media team chronicling a town hall meeting in Saint Louis in the White House Facebook feed (March 11, 2010).



Figure 2. Jesse Lee narrates a town hall meeting in first person, employing a grassroots communication frame accentuated by words such as “hundreds”, “intense” and “enthusiasm for change”. Via the White House Facebook feed (March 11, 2010)

Although the iconography presents some differences (The White House's avatar is the presidential logo; OFA's is a portrait of Barack Obama), the campaigns were run under the same graphic standards and transmitted a sense of concord.

Many of the messages make up for their limited word count (140 characters in Twitter, over double that in Facebook) by offering hyperlinks to text, video, audio or photographic content hosted in either OFA's or The White House's Flickr, Vimeo or YouTube accounts, themselves exemplars of the process of *remediation*.

1. The grassroots activist

The term “grassroots” has had many embodiments and connotations throughout recent political history. Once deemed as a reactionary force, a driving agent of the 1960s and 1970s social upheavals, it is now gaining notoriety as an inspirational and legitimate *raison d'être*.⁴² It has also been subject to a range of interpretations. All of them, however, stress the tight relationship that the concept must hold with the community – this, in turn, brings about legitimacy–. After discussing the definitions of “community” put forward by Hillary (1968) and Warren (1963), Willie et al. offer the following meaning: “... community is a social organization of people that facilitates social interaction between individuals and groups of individuals by way of common bonding, socialization, and the implementation of justice for the purpose of supporting and sustaining each member of the collective, as well as promoting the general welfare within the context of a common locality.” (2008: 4) The authors set out this definition for the analysis of grassroots movements. They also reference the early studies made by Manuel Castells (1983) in the field of urban sociology, in which the Catalanian social scientist concludes that “space... [is] a basis for all forms of social organization”

⁴² In Australia, the political activism of Get Up! (www.getup.org.au) has adopted some of the viral techniques employed by the Obama campaign, from which they got training prior to the 2010 federal elections in August 2010.

(Castells, 1983: 69, cited in Willie et. al., 2008: 4). What role, then, can *virtual* spaces play in conjunction with actions taken in the physical world?

From the analysis of social media employed by both organisations it is possible to demonstrate that the grassroots narrative in both TWH and OFA has been consistent. This is the archetype that sets the Obama presidency apart from its preceding ones: however, grassroots activism is generally opposed to governmental power, and the conflagration of these two forms of political practice (grassroots activism and statism) is an oxymoron in itself. This archetype is skilfully constructed by Organizing for America, but at times overlaps with the archetypes of the bipartisan unifier and the Commander-in-Chief. This overlap is at once one of the most criticised elements of President Obama, but also the foundations of his political capital.

Through social media, Obama has payed homage to the precursors of the political tradition he embodies in regards to grassroots activism (Figure 3). Inserted in the narrative of the HCR rebate, were references to the civil rights movements, such as this one:



Figure 3. President Obama with a group of veterans from the civil rights movement, part of Obama's political heritage (TWH Facebook account, January 19, 2010).

As shown in the figure above, Obama's calls for action do not escape the ideology and methods of his political forefathers (not only Lincoln and Roosevelt, but

also African-American politicians like Jesse Jackson, the first person of such ethnicity to run in the Democratic presidential primaries). Even though Obama's use of online social media is seemingly inscribed in the realm of the *virtual*, his strategies are rooted in actions that are taken in the physical world through traditional means of communication (technological determinists might call them *archaic*) like telephone calls and town hall meetings, and that coincide with the methods Hindman (2009) identified in Howard Dean's pioneer online campaigning. Online social media applications like Facebook and Twitter, thus, were sometimes only *facilitators*, means to organise spatially and temporarily distanced individuals (tear down, so to speak, the spatiality handicap of physical networks).

This is demonstrated in the following series of Twitter posts (Figure 4), which show how short, telegraphic messages can serve as nodes that connect supporters and Everyday Makers with videos, live transmissions, message boards, strategy descriptions and expert opinion from members of the cabinet.⁴³

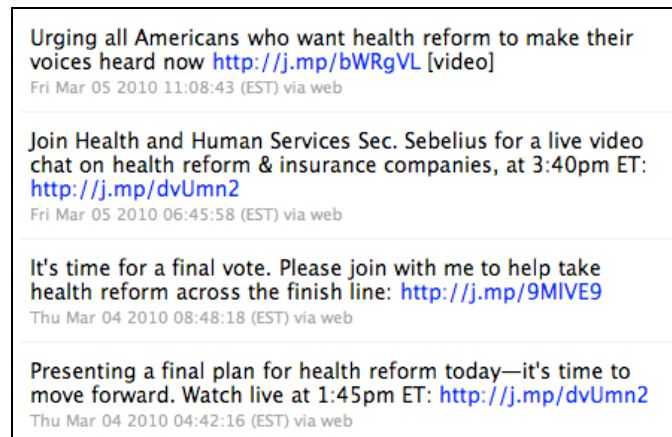


Figure 4. Twitter grassroots activities. Taken from @barackobama on March 4th and 5th, 2010.

⁴³ These same capacities were identified and used by Iranian political dissidents before, during and after the 2009 federal elections and the subsequent political upheaval.

The backbone of the campaign for Health Care Reform was composed of two strategic operations: “Health Reform by the Numbers” and “The Final March for Reform”. The first was an informative campaign present in both TWH and OFA feeds, the latter a call for action of surgical accuracy distributed only through OFA. These ran through March. In the case of “Health Reform by the Numbers”, graphic design was consistent, and the campaign talked not only to the young, tech savvy individuals identified by Hindman as the more prone to engage in online political dialogue. One of the following messages (Figure 6), for instance, engages with anyone “under the age of 65” and underlines the chances of being left without insurance during the following decade if the reform is not approved. Two differences stand out in this pair of messages (Figure 5, Figure 6). First, the number of responses is considerably larger in OFA’s feed, evidencing both a higher degree of citizen participation and the escalation of the Health Care Agenda one week before the vote. Second, in OFA’s message Obama’s stance is clearer, more “editorialised”.



Figure 5. “1,115”, Health Care Reform by the Numbers campaign. TWH Facebook feed, March 20, 2010.



Figure 6. “50/50”, Health Care Reform by the Numbers campaign. OFA Facebook feed, March 17, 2010.

The following message (Figure 7) is an example of the main narrative in “The Final March for Reform”, in which specific actions were required from OFA supporters. The “historic” nature of the campaign was constantly stated as well as the use of the grammatical form “you”. This marks one of the main differences between the two feeds: from The White House, the image of Obama as a Commander-in-Chief, as the leader of the pack, was emphasised, while in OFA the “us”, “we” and “you” elements were more salient. At times they tended to be on opposite sides of the top-down/bottom-top political spectrum: that is, either in a hierarchical or a collective communication dynamic.



Figure 7. Link for a YouTube video that explains The Final March for Reform campaign, hosted by Organizing for America. OFA Facebook feed, March 16, 2010.

Restless activism, the campaign headquarters remediated

The strategic, hands-on activities started in OFA earlier than in The White House and, as assumed, involved more traditional grassroots techniques. The following messages, distributed through Facebook (Figure 8) and Twitter (Figure 9) from the 10th to the 12th of February, show the manner in which the campaign –as if it was, in fact, of an electoral nature– extended the reach of the strategy and *involved* other actors, perhaps unwillingly. The members of OFA’s network were asked to extend their plight towards two salient elements of the public sphere, in general, and the HCR debate in particular: local media outlets and congressional candidates. This supports Castells’ idea of physical space as a concept inseparable from communities. To achieve a larger goal, OFA focused on how its supporters could influence their immediate reality, not only

through a sort of collaborative lobbying, but also pledging to volunteer hours to political campaigns.



Figure 8. Continuous calls for action at OFA’s Facebook feed. February 10th through 12th, 2010.



Figure 9. Twitter grassroots communications. From @barackobama, February 12-13, 2010.

The method (collectively reaching stakeholders) was replicated to reach Republican representatives and ask them to “do the right thing” (Figure 10). In this instance, the archetypes of the grassroots activist and the bipartisan unifier coexisted:



Figure 10. Invitation to supporters to “Call Voters in Key Republican Districts”. OFA Facebook feed, March 17, 2010.

During the final days before the final vote in Congress, there was a more insistent campaigning from OFA (Figure 11). In cyberspace, social media tools were the neuralgic centres of the operation and performed the function of a campaign office: they organised, informed and strove to inspire the armies of supporters. In the following five Facebook posts, uploaded between the 17th and 18th of March, all of these functions were performed: a link to a YouTube video of Obama commanding a town hall meeting in Ohio (traditionally a battleground state) was shown, alongside an inspirational, far reaching message (“In the end, this debate is about far more than politics. It comes down to what kind of country we want to be”); information was provided via facts “highlighted by The White House” (therefore, by the State, not by Obama *per se*) and through a didactic video on the cost of inaction; lastly, there was an invitation to the citizens to telephone their representatives. This last action goes hand in hand with the strategy employed in the previous two months, in which OFA directed its supporters to pledge their support for a candidate if she or he promised to support the reform, thus expanding the network of political allegiance.

The image shows a screenshot of five Facebook posts from Barack Obama's account, dated March 17-18, 2010. Each post includes a profile picture of Barack Obama, a text-based message, and a link to a video or webpage. The posts are as follows:

- Post 1:** "Barack Obama If we fail to act on health reform, everything stays the same, right? Wrong. If we turn back now, the health care system we currently have quickly starts to unravel." <http://My.BarackObama.com/CostOfInaction>. Video thumbnail: "WE'LL BE PAYING 1/4 OF OUR INCOME TOWARD HEALTH CARE". Title: "The Cost of Inaction [HD]". Length: 2:16. Date: 18 March at 10:35. Interactions: Comment, Like, View feedback (145), Share.
- Post 2:** "Barack Obama I am here for Natoma Canfield and countless others who need health reform. Who are you fighting for?" <http://j.mp/c-d>. Date: 18 March at 10:13. Interactions: Comment, Like, View feedback (17,037).
- Post 3:** "Barack Obama We must all speak out together to finish the job on health reform." Video thumbnail: "CALL". Title: "Raise Your Voice Today". URL: my.barackobama.com. Text: "The politicians in Washington need courage to face down the powerful interests who have held back progress for far too long. And all of us who share this cause need courage to speak up with persistence and clarity in these last days before the final vote." Date: 18 March at 03:10. Interactions: Comment, Like, View feedback (10,607), Share.
- Post 4:** "Barack Obama In 9 states, including the District of Columbia, there is no specific law making it illegal for insurers to reject applicants who are survivors of domestic violence, citing the history of domestic violence as a pre-existing condition." Video thumbnail: "9". Title: "Health Reform by the Numbers: 9". URL: my.barackobama.com. Text: "The White House is highlighting a new fact or figure each day to make the case for why we need to pass health reform now. Spread the word—share this post with your family, friends and online networks." Date: 18 March at 02:33. Interactions: Comment, Like, View feedback (7,979), Share.
- Post 5:** "Barack Obama In the end, this debate is about far more than politics. It comes down to what kind of country we want to be." Video thumbnail: "President Obama speaks in Strongsville, Ohio on Health Reform". URL: www.youtube.com. Text: "President Obama shares the story of Natoma Canfield, a cancer survivor who had to drop her health insurance due to excessive rate hikes only to be diagnosed with leukemia, and tells the crowd in Strongsville, Ohio that stories like hers make it clear that the time is now for health insurance reform." Date: 17 March at 11:13. Interactions: Comment, Unlike, View feedback (15,422), Share.

Figure 11. Intense grassroots communications during the week leading to the final vote in Congress. OFA Facebook account, March 17-18, 2010.

These various strategies came together in the Health Care Action Center (Figure 12), a webpage hosted at www.barackobama.com,⁴⁴ which offered links to partake in immediate actions for the campaign and which made an expansive use of Twitter under the “Tweet your senator” and “Tweet your rep” columns. We can consider this webpage to be an exemplar of the *remediated* campaign office: it performs similar actions but, ideally, does so with a much more efficient information flow. Reaching a local Senator, for example, is only at a click’s distance. Twitter eliminates the need for the services of

⁴⁴ Available at <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/health-care-action-center/> (accessed August 10, 2010).

the postal office, for example, and paints citizen communications with a coat of immediacy (fulfilling the SAME DAY DIRECTIVE). Supporters can react to the agenda set not every day or even every hour, but every minute.⁴⁵

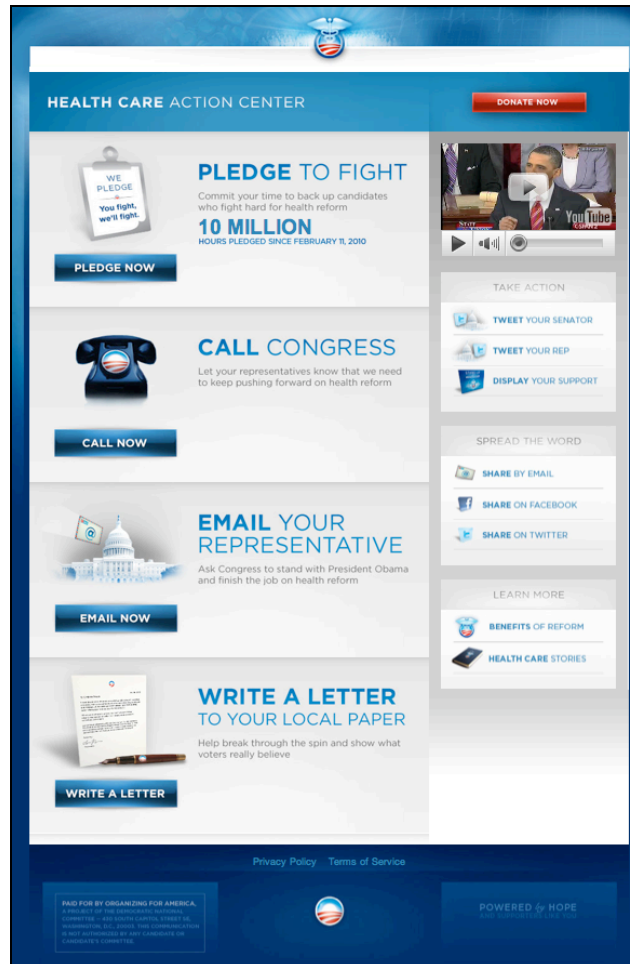


Figure 12. Remediated campaign headquarters. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/health-care-action-center/> (accessed August 10, 2010).

From The White House feed, we could see Obama himself partaking in these remediated campaign headquarters, working the phones on the night of the March 22, the historic date when the legislation was passed (Figure 13). Throughout this period, the availability of immediate photographic records was constant.

⁴⁵ As for the results that the Health Care Action Center delivered to the campaign in general, accessing OFA's records and performing an exhaustive quantitative study is the only way to make a precise data interpretation.

As Stallabrass points out in a review of Obama's depiction in Flickr:

“The ‘most interesting’ images are of a different character [from the official ones distributed by The White House], some being taken at rallies by photographers with no special access to Obama, some being of mural and poster depictions, and some homemade by photomontage or even Lego figures. The manufactured images, in paint and photomontage, play to the standard image of Obama, a low monumentalized view of the raised chin and eyes that seem to glimpse a bright future, a typical image of the visionary leader instantly familiar from regimes of all political stripes.” (2009: 197)

The distribution of the photographic imagery of the presidency, and the iconography created by it, doesn't have to wait until the evening news or next day's newspaper to be distributed and interpreted. Through Flickr, Facebook and Twitter (via the application Twitpic; see Figure 14) the presidential narrative is constructed as a continuous flow, as a fragmented depiction of Obama's profile as captured both by professional and amateur photographers.



Figure 13. President Obama calling members of Congress on March 21, 2010. From TWH Facebook account.



Figure 14. Distribution of amateur images through Twitter. From @WhiteHouse.

With the distribution of amateur images, President Obama loses some of the unattainability constantly represented by his office, but wins in terms of proximity to the citizens. He is not an unreachable politician, but someone close to his partisans. The following two images, one from Twitpic before a town hall meeting (Figure 15), and another distributed through Facebook, in which Obama shares a spontaneous meal with some bewildered customers at a restaurant, captures small moments that would be otherwise lost in the grinders of massive communication apparatuses (Figure 16).

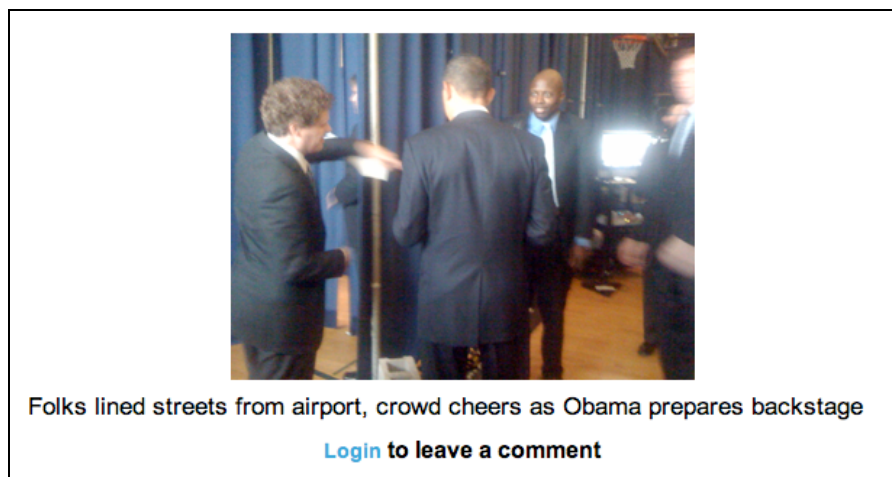


Figure 15. Twitpic image distributed through the White House Twitter feed. March 11, 2010.



Figure 16. Distribution of a photograph of President Obama making a surprise visit to a restaurant in Georgia. From TWH Facebook account, March 2, 2010.

Us vs. Them: We the people...

In the case of Obama, it is notable, and perhaps unprecedented,⁴⁶ that an incumbent with as much political, social and economical capital as the US President would be involved in an activity, grassroots activism, that generally relates to efforts conducted by citizens with little or no political leverage to influence higher instances of government. More often than not, the articulation of his activities is presented in an “us versus them” formulation. Surprisingly, from The White House’s Facebook account (and from a position of authority), Obama unleashed an attack on corporations and “big money”, holding them accountable for taking advantage of citizens via high premiums and advantageous plans. Interestingly, such a position was more subdued in OFA’s channels, contrary to what could be assumed due to the activist orientation of the organisation. In Castells’s terms, the pairing of the President and the Health Care Reform social movement signifies a marriage, or an intersection, of two previously divergent networks: the State and civil rights movements. This framing of social

⁴⁶ Although we can argue for some other international cases, like those of Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Lula in Brazil and Lech Walesa in Poland, all dissidents, community organizers or union leaders that constructed an approach to government based on their grassroots political formation.

movements as being defined by conflict can be related to Diani's conceptualisation of social movements as a "specific social dynamic." (2006: 130). For him, a social movement consists

"...in a process whereby several different actors, be they individuals, informal groups and/or organisations, come to elaborate, through either joint action or communication, a shared definition of themselves as being part of the same side in a social conflict. By doing so, they provide meaning to otherwise unconnected protest events or symbolic antagonistic practices, and make explicit the emergence of specific conflicts and issues." (Diani, 2006: 130).

Let us read the following posts published in The White House Facebook page (Figures 17, 18 and 19) where "the insurance industry" is criticised. One could argue that a mode of *balkanisation* is present, as the harsh, direct statements leave little room for debate:



Figure 17. Link to a blog entry in which the insurance companies are framed as advantageous in the beginning of the Health Care Reform Debate. TWH Facebook account, January 13, 2010.



Figure 18. Framing of the insurance industry in the White House Facebook feed in the early stages of the HCR debate (January 28, 2010).



Figure 19. President Obama delivering a speech at Arcadia University in Philadelphia (March 9, 2010).

In Twitter, both OFA and TWH framed the insurance companies (them) as being secretive, advantageous and greedy. This remark was consistently reiterated during the three months that comprised the debate (Figures 20, 21).

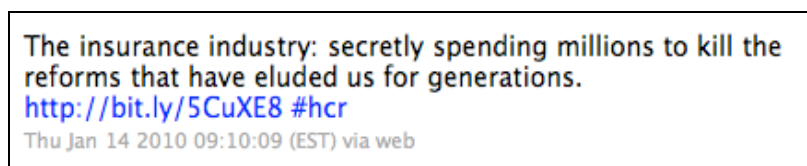


Figure 20. Twitter post that portrays insurance companies as secretive and that reiterates the historical nature of the reform. From @barackobama



Figure 21. Pragmatism in action: the message offers a link to a comparison between insurance premiums and wages. From @whitehouse

This leads to the question of whom the “us” is. This narrative device is presented in a way consistent with the discursive and audiovisual *leitmotifs* of Obama’s 2008 campaign: it is everyone, everyday Americans from the “Main Street” who, according to the Obama narrative, can make things happen, take matters into their own hands and control the steering wheel of Washington. In some posts, we can see how Obama is flanked by citizens (mainly from ethnic minorities) and the specific references to individual cases. Obama utilised this framing from both channels: citizens were constantly referred to as “folk” and “neighbours”. In this sense, the following image is telling: a crowd thanking Obama during a speech where “fraud” was the underlining argument (Figure 22).



Figure 22. Audiences listen as President Obama delivers a speech on Medicaid fraud. Contrary to the photographs distributed via Twitpic, this is an Official White House Photo.

It is also important to note that, particularly through the Twitter accounts, some of the elements of the 2008 presidential campaign became present when establishing the nature of the “us”. The “Yes We Can” slogan resurfaced (see Figure 25), and a variety of groups traditionally related to the “bread and butter” segments of the American mosaic were alluded to (“Nurses, nuns, small businesses”; Figure 23). Again, we are led

to question whether this could have been possible or politically risky in traditional media, if the resurrection of a campaign slogan wouldn't have inspired accusations from the conservative sphere. Even General Colin Powell, a life-long Republican associated with the first and second Bush regimes, and who famously endorsed Obama during the presidential election, made an appearance (Figure 24). Even though it had nothing to do with HCR, his inclusion was present during this period and links the 2008 presidential campaign to current presidential communications. Powell's mention –and the moral stature he holds among both Republicans and the African-American community; he considered to run for President in 2000– is also important in the formation of Obama's persona as a *bipartisan unifier*, our next archetype.



Figure 23. Groups commonly associated to grassroots movements were constantly alluded during the HCR debate. From @whitehouse.



Figure 24. The reappearance of Republican Colin Powell, who famously endorsed Obama during the presidential election. From @whitehouse



Figure 25. Resurrection of the 2008 presidential campaign slogan after the reform was passed in Congress. From @barackobama

2. *The bipartisan unifier*

One of the elements that made Obama's keynote speech during the 2004 Democratic Convention so noticeable, was the concept of a post-racial and post-partisan America where citizens would cease perceiving themselves and others as black or white, Red

state or Blue state, and start doing so as members of a multiethnic, multicultural community that fights to reach the same goal: communal well-being. In the political reality of a truly polarised nation that Obama described in his keynote speech during the 2004 Democratic National Convention, however, this cannot always hold true or be feasible. During the Health Care Reform debate some moments revealed the *cyberbalkanisation* inherent in the American online political discourse. Moreover, Obama's grassroots initiatives became increasingly Party-aligned as the vote in Congress approached.

Obama's open campaigning for the Democratic Party made itself evident early in the year, when elections were held to fill in the seat of Ted Kennedy, the long standing Massachusetts senator who championed the reform throughout his decades-long political career and offered Obama one of his most salient endorsements during the 2008 campaign (moreover, the endorsement linked the Kennedy dynasty and its political and symbolic capital to Obama). The following posts show the importance Obama placed in this senatorial race (see Figure 26). The post of January 21 is of special interest, as it shows Obama addressing his supporters in defeat, acknowledging the "discontent with the pace of change" and, nevertheless, putting the spotlight on the "amazing" efforts from volunteers.



Figure 26. Calls for action during the campaign to fill in Ted Kennedy’s congressional seat in Massachusetts and the acknowledgement of defeat. From OFA’s Facebook account, January 19-21.

This campaign was also promoted via Twitter, but only through OFA. In this case, The White House assumed a partisan stance and overtly supported the Democratic candidate Martha Coakley. It directly alluded to health care, thus framing this issue as a partisan matter:



Figure 27. Campaign to elect Martha Coakley as the successor of Senator Ted Kennedy. From @whitehouse

Nowhere was the rapid temporality of online social media more evident than in Obama’s intervals of conciliation and negotiation with the Republican Party leading up

to a bipartisan meeting in February 25. Under the slogan “Reaching Across the Aisle” (identifying himself as a Democrat, as there would be no aisle to cross if he had fulfilled his calling to lead a post-partisan America), Obama called for a meeting and then reported on it through live Twitter messages and a follow-up letter in which the ideas lay out on the event were discussed.

On February 23 a post openly demanded a health care plan from the Republicans, addressing the Republican Party by its name for the first time in this discussion. One can only imagine the reactions from the GOP and the network pundits if a president opened the door of dialogue and then, two days before the event, assumed a confrontational position if the same messages were to be conveyed through national television. The reaction could have escalated. But the flow of messages in online media is vaster, more trepid and more difficult to analyse. The progression of the bipartisan meeting narratives went as follows (Figures 28 through 32):



Figure 28. Introduction of the “Reaching across the aisle” narrative”. From TWH Facebook account (February 10, 2010).



Figure 29. Open invitation to Republicans by Dan Pfeiffer. Obama is referred to only as “the President”. From TWH Facebook account (February 23, 2010).



Figure 30. Message on the day of the bipartisan meeting (25 February, 2010). Note how the objective of the meeting is set: "... put Americans in control of their own health care". From TWH Facebook page.



Figure 31. Link to a photo gallery of the bipartisan meeting. Note Obama's stance as a member of the group engaged in a horizontal discussion. From TWH Facebook feed (February 26, 2010).



Figure 32. A conciliatory stance: a report on a document sent by the President to the Leadership of both parties, emphasizing the best ideas from both sides. From TWH Facebook feed (March 3, 2010).

In the above message from March 3rd (Figure 32) The White House emphasises that during the meeting there were valuable ideas from both parties, which coincides with the bipartisan unifier archetype. However, as the vote approached the abovementioned process of *cyberbalkanisation* started to be present. Even from the White House the approach was confrontational and, what is more, it was strengthened by citizen participation (Figure 33).



Figure 33. Interactive questions and answers with White House fans in Facebook. From TWH Facebook feed (March 20, 2010).

However, before the bipartisan meeting, Obama held a press conference (the camera captured many of the visual motifs associated with the Commander-in-Chief archetype, such as the American flag, the White House emblem and the presidential podium) in which he explained what bipartisanship means for him (Figure 34). It was announced through TWH Twitter and transmitted through its blog. In it, Obama stated that there might be differences, but that these only enrich dialogue. With the use of this archetype, Obama could be addressing Bang's Everyday Makers: individuals who get

involved in specific policy issues that affect them (such as health care) but who don't want to associate themselves to a specific political inclination.

The archetype of the bipartisan unifier denotes a break from practices that promote *cyberbalkanisation*. However, as it is unfeasible to maintain it in a polarised political arena, it makes these divisions more evident and puts Obama's credibility and legitimacy at risk.



Figure 34. *Reaching Across the Aisle on Jobs and Health Reform*, White House press briefing in which Obama talked about his notion of bipartisanship. From www.whitehouse.gov (February 9, 2010).

Additionally, as a member of the Democratic Party, Obama is also expected to support the Party's candidates and policies, and to use his political capital to prevent the Republicans to take further control of government. Bipartisanship might have been one of Obama's most salient political innovations, but due to the confrontational nature of social movements, to be a bipartisan president in the United States is almost *oxymoronic*.

3. *The Commander-in-Chief*

There is a longstanding tradition of the American president as being not only a leader, but a Commander-in-Chief, a military figure who takes charge and makes swift, clear-cut decisions. Of the four archetypes identified in this thesis, this is the only one that Obama is constitutionally and politically *expected* to perform. This is a requirement of both public perception and the traditional image of the presidency constructed by both the White House and by the corporate entertainment complex epitomised by Hollywood. As mentioned in Chapter II, Obama's recent predecessors, particularly George H.W. and George W. Bush, constructed a solid imagery around the military component of the presidency, and Obama has to fit into this profile. This archetype can affect his freedom of expression in issues like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the British Petroleum oil spill in early 2010.

In the case of Obama, this archetype can also be related to that of the pragmatic statesman. During the HCR debate, Obama embodied this political archetype during key moments, particularly in the *framing* of the debate and the *aftermath* of the vote in Congress (in parallel, citizens were invited to co-sign the bill, which relates to Obama's grassroots persona). Apart from the HCR issue, he was active in communicating in this style in a number of diverse issues, such as in the subject of relief for the January 12 earthquake in Haiti through the White House Channels. In this case, Twitter functioned as a command centre in which different actors were coordinated:

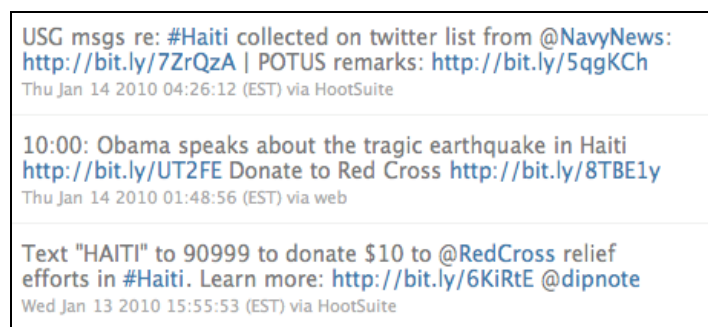


Figure 35. Relief efforts for Haiti coordinated through @whitehouse. January 13-14, 2010.

The White House Twitter feed was also the only channel in which the military was directly referenced during this period in any issue separate from HCR. These communications were not related to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but to the same relief efforts for Haiti paired with SMS donations to The Red Cross:



Figure 36. Relief efforts for Haiti coordinated through @whitehouse, and in which the Red Cross and the US Army were involved. January 16, 2010.

In Facebook, the preparation for the HCR debate started on January 5th, just after the winter holidays. Obama's demeanour was that of a hands-on leader ready for the task ahead. The message, which is a caption to a photograph of Obama and his family coming down from the presidential helicopter –in itself a military symbol, an element of the war spectacle perpetuated through the American presidency, reads:



Figure 37. Barack, Michelle, Malia and Sasha Obama descend from the presidential helicopter. January 5, 2010.

Note the quotation marks on “vacation”, the message being that although Obama was spending some time with his family, it was not a full vacation *per se*: under this narrative, Obama is always in charge, never fully puts his guard down and immediately after returning to the Oval Office would address the most pressing matters for 2010, where the Health Care Reform was singled out as one of the most salient.

In the following days, on January 9th and 10th, two messages revealed (Figure 38, Figure 39) a more pragmatic approach that coincides with connotation of a hands-on incumbent.



Figure 38. Hard data from a Harvard and USC economists. The White House propagated academic analysis of the health care system through its Facebook account (January 9, 2010).



Figure 39. Link to the President’s weekly address, where he outlines the immediate benefits that Health Care Reform would bring during the first year of its implementation. From the White House Facebook account (January 10, 2010).

After that time, messages containing financial facts and conclusions reached by advisers and academic institutions became frequent (Figure 40). Health Care Reform

was not just Obama's political Moby Dick, his hey defining domestic political agenda item: it was, from his perspective and that of *others*, an urgent measure.

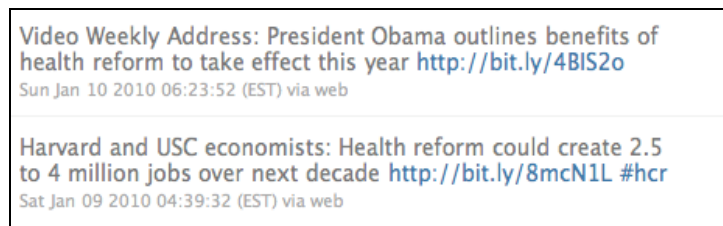


Figure 40. Messages outlining the benefits of HCR were also distributed via Twitter. From @WhiteHouse, January 9-10, 2010.

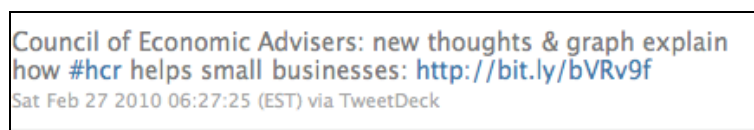


Figure 41. Presidential communications often referred to the opinion of experts when transmitting the benefits of the reform. From @WhiteHouse (February 27, 2010).

Even if some of the messages propagated through OFA's feeds were similar, and sometimes referenced the same events, from The White House Obama had a more commanding demeanour, and the graphic content was focused on him alone, not on him and the citizens (Figure 42, from three days before the final vote, exemplifies this). Although apparently only a nuance, this decision –the use of photographs in presidential communications is anything but random– follows the iconography of both the presidency (the Commander-in-Chief flanked by the American flag) and the Obama mythology (he holds a relaxed, yet commanding posture).



Figure 42. Invitation to attend President Obama's town hall meeting in George Mason University. From TWH Facebook geed (March 19, 2010).

Nevertheless, as “the President”, not as “Obama”, he kept addressing, as in his campaign and victory speech in November of 2008 –some media commentators accuse him of being a perpetual candidate; e.g. Richard Cohen, 2009–, individual cases to speak of a broader generality (Figure 43). Digital social media tools not only allow him to keep a two-way open channel with citizens, but to promote and exalt this communications. The reference to a specific citizen who could be *any* citizen, regardless of partisanship, can appeal not only to the followers who have already offered their loyalty, but also to Everyday Makers who align with President Obama in very specific issues such as health care, renewable energy or the recent indictment of oil companies (specifically British Petroleum) after the Gulf ecological disaster, for instance.



Figure 43. As in his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama referenced specific cases to talk of the vast majority. From TWH Facebook feed (March 16, 2010).

Since March 2010, Obama has also made some unprecedented use of digital platforms that are associated to the Commander-in-Chief archetype. In July 2010, for example, he “starred” in the YouTube video “President Obama explains HealthCare.gov”,⁴⁷ in which he describes and explains the functionality of the website through which American citizens can consult their health care options. In a modestly

⁴⁷ It can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCQSGnZ0ITg>

produced video, the president appears in a library and delivers a clear lecture (he is Professor Obama once again). After the Health Care Reform was approved, he has shifted from being mainly the grassroots activist to being the Commander-in-Chief.

The medium allows him to deliver a family-oriented message that portrays him as technologically savvy and, at the same time, down-to-Earth statesman.

4. The pop icon

One of the main criticisms that Obama received during his presidential campaign was that his pop icon status, both in the United States and abroad, overshadowed his political stature. His campaign was a classic representation of image over matter, his adversaries argued. Mitchell states that:

“Obama is unquestionably the most visible US president to date, and this is partly an effect of his striking identity as an icon of racial difference, and partly the personal beauty of himself and his family, his sculpted facial features, his body image especially in motions that reveal his athleticism. His hyper-visibility is also a result of his unprecedented mastery of new media. Obama is not just the first Black president; he is the first wired president. And he is wired, not only into the internet, but also into what might be thought of as its exact opposite, namely the face to face encounter. Facebook, YouTube and his Blackberry, along with an amazing variety of online fundraising organizations famously contributed an enormous grassroots financial basis for his campaign that overwhelmed the Clinton base of fat-cat donors.” (2009: 125)

During the HCR debate (specifically after his State of the Union address), Obama answered to citizen enquiries through YouTube, a digital broadcast that was promoted both through Twitter and Facebook (Figure 44). The citizens voted questions

and, some days later, White House staff answered those that did not make the cut (Figure 45). Although it might seem as a minor incidence in a Web 2.0 environment, in the case of presidential communications this level of interactivity is rare and is a *remediation* of the town hall meeting and the institutional radio show, both of in which, conversely, there is a higher control over content.



Figure 44. YouTube served as an open channel to submit questions to President Obama after the State of the Union address. From TWH Facebook account (January 18, 2010).



Figure 45. Invitation to write and discuss Obama's responses in Facebook, in real time (February 2, 2010).

On the other hand, the iconic, archetypical aura he communicated during the campaign has also been used in his presidential communications, although many of his decisions have proven controversial and have taken a toll on his approval ratings (as of September 28, 2010, his disapproval rating was at a high 50.5% according to RealClearPolitics.com), which reflects the persistence of a polarised society.

In the midst of the debate, *à la* Bill Clinton, Obama also showed his pop icon allure as he met with Hollywood celebrities (a guild firmly committed to him) and

world leaders (the Dalai Lama), and portrayed the presidency as an inspirational institution. In a similar tone, other communications included everyday aspects of his family life in The White House, like images of Bo, the first family's dog, and Obama's predictions for the 2010 NCAA basketball tournament. It could be argued that since the adoption of television as a mass medium, and in concordance with the *telegenic* presidency established by Reagan (Rather, 2008: 26), establishing points of contact with American pop culture is one of the tasks that are expected to be fulfilled by Presidents.

However, it must be emphasised that in the specific case of Obama, the endorsement by celebrities⁴⁸ does not necessarily imply a boost of popularity. Pease and Brewer (2008) studied the influence of Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Obama during the electoral process, and found out that the real influence of this practice among voters is, at best, modest: "If Winfrey represents a best-case scenario for finding effects produced by a celebrity endorsement, then the effects of other celebrity endorsements may be even more modest– or nonexistent." (396) However, as was the aforementioned case of Jesse Ventura, Obama's celebrity, added to the celebrity of those who endorse him or with whom he makes public appearances, help in the configuration of his presidential image: he is in touch both with everyday folk, Everyday Citizens in the vein of George Clooney or Bono, and the creative and political elite.

⁴⁸ Constant during the presidential campaign, not only in reference to Obama, but to some other candidates like Republican Mike Huckabee, who was endorsed by action hero Chuck Norris.



Figure 46. Bo, the Obamas’ dog, is a constant presence in the White House Facebook account (February 10, 2010).



Figure 47. The president meets with Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, two of the Hollywood celebrities that have supported him from the outset. From TWH Facebook account (March 15, 2010).

President Obama & His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama - see the photo, read the account <http://bit.ly/bASghF>
 Fri Feb 19 2010 08:43:08 (EST) via web

Figure 48. @White House Twitter message linking to a photograph and a chronicle of Obama’s meeting with the Dalai Lama, a spiritual and political world leader (February 19, 2010).

5. *The role of other actors in crafting Obama’s “voice”*

As other presidents have done in the past,⁴⁹ Obama was aided by his wife’s image as a communication tool during this period. Through these three months, First Lady Michelle Obama embarked in a campaign against child obesity, “Let’s Move” (www.letsmove.gov), described as “America’s move to raise a healthier generation of

⁴⁹ We can think of Hillary Clinton’s advocacy of the health care reform while she was the First Lady, or Nancy Reagan’s iconic role in her husband’s presidency.

kids”. Although not directly associated with Health Care Reform in the policy-making arena, it is inscribed in the health care narrative, as it shares many of the keywords of the debate (“health”, “children” and “future”, for example; see Figures 49 and 50).

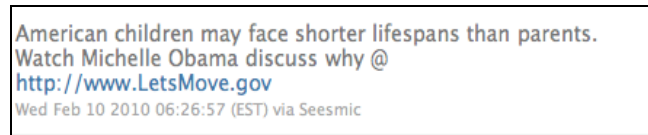


Figure 49. Link to www.LetsMove.org distributed via Facebook. From @WhiteHouse (February 10, 2010)



Figure 50. First Lady Michelle Obama engaged in a long and vast campaign to battle child obesity, which added to the national health narrative of her husband’s presidential communications during the first quarter of 2010. From the White House Facebook feed (March 8, 2010).

The First Lady also talked directly about the HCR in a YouTube video titled “Why Health Insurance Reform Matters to Women” (see Figure 51).⁵⁰ In it, she talks about her own experience as a mother and the importance of insurance in family life, a theme not present in the President’s approach to the issue, of a much more pragmatic nature. This extends, however, the President’s political *leit motif* of marrying grand policies with individual experiences, in this case that of his wife and daughters. An Everyday Maker herself, Michelle Obama might appeal to citizens who consider obesity in particular, and health in general, to be a salient social and political issue in the United States.

⁵⁰ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdDUQAozZxs> (accessed August 10, 2010)



Figure 51. First Lady Michelle Obama narrates her personal family experiences and reflects on the importance of the reform for women in a YouTube video.

Secretary for Health and Human Services Katherine Sibelius also engaged in the debate from both OFA and TWH (see Figures 52 and 53), answering citizen enquiries through live videoconferences and being the more pragmatic face of the administration. One can only guess the economic and possibly political costs of The White House using television airtime for such purposes. Additionally, this *remediated* practice also allows for citizens to be *producers* of content and fit into the role of multimedia journalists.



Figure 52. Kathleen Sibelius and Nancy-Ann DeParle were two of the actors that helped craft Obama's voice during the Health Care Reform debate. From the White House Facebook feed (March 5, 2010).



Figure 53. Kathleen Sibelius made regular appearances in OFA’s channels. She was the pragmatic face of the presidency when dealing with the specifics of the reform. From OFA’s Facebook feed (January 9, 2010).

The White House Communications director Dan Pfeiffer and Nancy-Ann DeParle, director of The White House Office of Health Reform, were the other two most active spokespersons for the administration during this period, thus aiding in creation of the many-headed and many-voiced subject that is the online representation of Barack Obama. The use of other actors in crafting Barack Obama’s voice also speaks of inclusive political communication, where the presidency is portrayed as a collection of efforts rather than a source of unilateral, unequivocal power. This allows for the *remediation* of the town hall meeting during a campaign, where actors related to the candidate interact with citizens.

V. Conclusions: who constructs Barack Obama?

No president is an island. She or he is more of an *archipelago*.

The way in which Barack Obama communicated during the debate around Health Care Reform reflects a complex set of cultural and political connotations, expectations and paradigms. Even though his candidacy was revolutionary in discursive and ideological terms—one of these revolutions was, indeed, his use of online social media—his presidential persona has to follow the tradition constructed by a decades-long political tradition and balance this tradition with the political innovations that Organizing for America introduced. For example, in a political rally in support of VOTE 2010, organized in the University of Wisconsin on September 29, 2010, Obama said: “Let’s show Washington one more time that change doesn’t come from the top. It doesn’t come from millions of dollars of special interest-funded attack ads. Change happens from the bottom up. Change happens because of you.”⁵¹

But he is now Washington. He is now at the top.

There are indeed parallel and even perpendicular narratives sprouting from Obama’s presidential communications, very much in the spirit of the postmodernist “self or identity” that Barney describes as “the discursive surface upon which a complex network of relationships, symbols and gestures converge to articulate themselves.” (2004: 18) Perhaps presidential narratives, still permeated by the *grandeur* of modernity, will catch up with the spirit of our times. There are still a lot of questions that need answering and further research opportunities.⁵²

⁵¹ The video can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28XM4fb93Zo> (accessed September 30, 2010).

⁵² Further debates on the nature of social media and their relationship with political spheres in general, and State communications, in particular, can and should be encouraged. For instance, the oligopolistic nature of Facebook and Twitter, as well as the Google conglomerate (in which YouTube is incorporated), could be contrasted to the idea of a digital *agora* ideally owned and shaped by expert *producers*. The

The three processes identified in Chapter II – *remediation*, *produsage* and *cyberbalkanisation*– are present in the ever-flowing construction of the presidential mythology and, all in all, promote a looser institutional control. The presidency is increasingly defined not only by its more rigid institutional frameworks, but also by the imagery that the media and the public construct around it and is delineated by academic and secular interpretation of current and past presidencies. This imagery, in turn, comprises a stream of symbols that define what the president is *expected* to be.

These interconnected narratives –some created by official instances, most by what we have come to call *producers*, albeit *elite producers*– demarcate diverse online personae that make up the discourse of contemporary statespersons. This marks a variation in the way the image of previous presidencies has been constructed: Obama truly represents a turning point in terms of media use. When History is written, many of the complexities that are involved in a presidential term are forgotten and one or two salient issues take over the general public perception of a President. For instance, Richard Nixon’s name will be forever associated with the Watergate scandal, although there were other transcendental events during his presidency, such as his visit to Mao’s China. For many, Bill Clinton is remembered for the Lewinsky affaire, and important foreign policy agendas like the intervention in Kosovo or military aid to Colombia have been overlooked. The interaction of the White House with the media and the citizenry makes it increasingly hard for any of these to pinpoint a salient event in the presidential agenda. Through the juxtaposition of online social media and traditional State communication mechanisms, statesperson now have the possibility of construction a

balance between traditional and digital media in presidential communications can also render revelatory conclusions. Obama’s use of social media platforms to address specific ethnic and minority groups through applications like BlackPlanet, MiGente and AsianAvenue, as well as Twitter accounts like @lacasablanca, greatly neglected during the HCR debate, is also fertile ground for political science and new media studies dissertations, as is an analysis of the changing role of White House correspondents. Additionally, an analysis of user comments in each channel could also shine some light on the nature of networked political communications.

more multifaceted persona attached to parallel agendas and narratives. In the case of Barack Obama, these narratives are a development from the ones configured “singlehandedly” by other US presidents, and far more numerous than the ones manufactured by press offices. However, the President is still constricted by the roles, such as Commander-in-Chief, that he was to embody to follow the tradition imbedded in his post. Institutional structures can also limit a President’s discursive possibilities. For instance, Washington’s real *politik* lead to the breakdown of the bipartisan approach to Health Care Reform.

The narratives are a product of both political strategy and public perception. This may trample 20th century notions of political interaction, such as Chomsky and Herman’s Propaganda Model, as control is increasingly harder and could get still more complicated with the future development of a “Web 3.0” environment delineated by semantic clouds, by a collective mind. This will also lead to methodological problems and theoretical opportunities in regards to academic research on electoral and presidential politics.

Contrary to past presidencies and partly due to the availability and diversity of web communications in the network society, there exists a multitude of micro-narratives in presidential communications that substitute the grand narratives of the past. The multitude of authors involved, overtly or not, in the writing of these messages, allows for multiple and sometimes contradicting stances on the same issue (in Obama’s case, open doors to the Republican Party regarding a bipartisan meeting, on one hand, and its indictment, on the other). These stances could talk to the new breed of politically-involved citizenry: Everyday Makers. These Everyday Makers are in a privileged position to challenge some of the President’s policies (contrary to most sworn Democrats) and strongly support those that coincide with their political viewpoints.

Statespersons such as Obama are in a position to identify these viewpoints and design strategies that produce political capital by aligning to them. “Final March for Reform” is an example of the use of one of these new strategies.

Based on the conclusions reached by Hindman and others concerning citizen participation in the social media political arena, we can come, however, to a hypothetical deduction: the fragment of the population that has interacted with the Obama presidency and who collaborated with its strategies during the fight for HCR could very well be the same that supported him as a candidate. Online support for Organizing for America is on the rise thanks, in part, to the increasing sophistication of social media tools, but during the HCR debate there were no strategies designed to truly reach across the aisle in terms of citizen political affiliation.

As Obama stepped into the podium for his inauguration speech, expectations were high in relation to his use of computer-mediated communication tools. During the HCR debate these collection of media did allow him to move with relative freedom in the bottom-top/top-down political spectrum, sometimes in the same day, within a few hours and even minutes. It also allowed him to perpetuate the traditional iconography of the American presidency while keeping his grassroots aura alive; to be bipartisan and Democrat; and to be aided by other voices that directly or indirectly supported the Health Care narrative. His grassroots activist persona, however, was the more prominent during this period.

Obama’s presidency will mark a transitional phase in the history of mediated presidential communications, and the collaborative construction of his online personae will set a precedent for future statespersons, in the United States and elsewhere.

Appendix A

Health Care Reform debate timeline, key events. January-March 2010

January

1-31 The White House releases the findings of several studies on the effects of inaction regarding a policy change, and the benefits HCR could bring to citizens and the American economy.

4. The Obamas arrive from their winter holidays. The President singles out Health Care Reform as one of the priorities for 2010.

10-21. Campaign efforts through OFA to support the candidature of Martha Coakley for the Massachusetts senatorial seat vacated after Ted Kennedy's death. President Obama stresses the importance that seat holds for the Health Care Reform cause.

21. The Democratic Party loses the senatorial seat formerly occupied by Ted Kennedy.

18. The President answers questions posted by citizens through YouTube after the State of the Union Address.

February

25. Bipartisan meeting regarding Health Care Reform is hosted at The White House.

March

1-22. "Health Reform by the Numbers" and "The Final March for Reform" campaigns are run.

9-15. President Obama holds town hall meetings throughout the country.

21. Barack Obama makes calls to several members of Congress from the Oval Office.

22. Final vote in Congress. Health Care Reform is approved.

Appendix B

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1. A member of the White House new media team chronicling a town hall meeting in Saint Louis in the White House Facebook feed (March 11, 2010).	50
Figure 2. Jesse Lee narrates a town hall meeting in first person, employing a grassroots communication frame accentuated by words such as “hundreds”, “intense” and “enthusiasm for change”. Via the White House Facebook feed (March 11, 2010)	50
Figure 3. President Obama with a group of veterans from the civil rights movement, part of Obama’s political heritage (TWH Facebook account, January 19, 2010).	52
Figure 4. Twitter grassroots activities. Taken from @barackobama on March 4 th and 5 th , 2010.	53
Figure 5. “1,115”, Health Care Reform by the Numbers campaign. TWH Facebook feed, March 20, 2010.	54
Figure 6. “50/50”, Health Care Reform by the Numbers campaign. OFA Facebook feed, March 17, 2010.	54
Figure 7. Link for a YouTube video that explains The Final March for Reform campaign, hosted by Organizing for America. OFA Facebook feed, March 16, 2010.	55
Figure 8. Continuous calls for action at OFA’s Facebook feed. February 10 th through 12 th , 2010.	56
Figure 9. Twitter grassroots communications. From @barackobama, February 12-13, 2010.	56
Figure 10. Invitation to supporters to “Call Voters in Key Republican Districts”. OFA Facebook feed, March 17, 2010.	57
Figure 11. Intense grassroots communications during the week leading to the final vote in Congress. OFA Facebook account, March 17-18, 2010.	58
Figure 12. <i>Remediated</i> campaign headquarters. http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/health-care-action-center/ (accessed August 10, 2010).	59
Figure 13. President Obama calling members of Congress on March 21, 2010. From TWH Facebook account.	60
Figure 14. Distribution of amateur images through Twitter. From @WhiteHouse.	61

Figure 15. Twitpic image distributed through the White House Twitter feed. March 11, 2010.	61
Figure 16. Distribution of a photograph of President Obama making a surprise visit to a restaurant in Georgia. From TWH Facebook account, March 2, 2010.	62
Figure 17. Link to a blog entry in which the insurance companies are framed as advantageous in the beginning of the Health Care Reform Debate. TWH Facebook account, January 13, 2010.	63
Figure 18. Framing of the insurance industry in the White House Facebook feed in the early stages of the HCR debate (January 28, 2010).	64
Figure 19. President Obama delivering a speech at Arcadia University in Philadelphia (March 9, 2010).	64
Figure 20. Twitter post that portrays insurance companies as secretive and that reiterates the historical nature of the reform. From @barackobama	64
Figure 21. Pragmatism in action: the message offers a link to a comparison between insurance premiums and wages. From @whitehouse	64
Figure 22. Audiences listen as President Obama delivers a speech on Medicaid fraud. Contrary to the photographs distributed via Twitpic, this is an Official White House Photo.	65
Figure 23. Groups commonly associated to grassroots movements were constantly alluded during the HCR debate. From @whitehouse.	66
Figure 24. The reappearance of Republican Colin Powell, who famously endorsed Obama during the presidential election. From @whitehouse	66
Figure 25. Resurrection of the 2008 presidential campaign slogan after the reform was passed in Congress. From @barackobama	66
Figure 26. Calls for action during the campaign to fill in Ted Kennedy's congressional seat in Massachusetts and the acknowledgement of defeat. From OFA's Facebook account, January 19-21.	68
Figure 27. Campaign to elect Martha Coakley as the successor of Senator Ted Kennedy. From @whitehouse	68
Figure 28. Introduction of the "Reaching across the aisle" narrative". From TWH Facebook account (February 10, 2010).	69
Figure 29. Open invitation to Republicans by Dan Pfeiffer. Obama is referred to only as "the President". From TWH Facebook account (February 23, 2010).	69

Figure 30. Message on the day of the bipartisan meeting (25 February, 2010). Note how the objective of the meeting is set: "... put Americans in control of their own health care". From TWH Facebook page.	70
Figure 31. Link to a photo gallery of the bipartisan meeting. Note Obama's stance as a member of the group engaged in a horizontal discussion. From TWH Facebook feed (February 26, 2010).	70
Figure 32. A conciliatory stance: a report on a document sent by the President to the Leadership of both parties, emphasizing the best ideas from both sides. From TWH Facebook feed (March 3, 2010).	70
Figure 33. Interactive questions and answers with White House fans in Facebook. From TWH Facebook feed (March 20, 2010).	71
Figure 34. <i>Reaching Across the Aisle on Jobs and Health Reform</i> , White House press briefing in which Obama talked about his notion of bipartisanship. From www.whitehouse.gov (February 9, 2010).	72
Figure 35. Relief efforts for Haiti coordinated through @whitehouse. January 13-14, 2010.	73
Figure 36. Relief efforts for Haiti coordinated through @whitehouse, and in which the Red Cross and the US Army were involved. January 16, 2010.	74
Figure 37. Barack, Michelle, Malia and Sasha Obama descend from the presidential helicopter. January 5, 2010.	74
Figure 38. Hard data from a Harvard and USC economists. The White House propagated academic analysis of the health care system through its Facebook account (January 9, 2010).	75
Figure 39. Link to the President's weekly address, where he outlines the immediate benefits that Health Care Reform would bring during the first year of its implementation. From the White House Facebook account (January 10, 2010).	75
Figure 40. Messages outlining the benefits of HCR were also distributed via Twitter. From @WhiteHouse, January 9-10, 2010.	76
Figure 41. Presidential communications often referred to the opinion of experts when transmitting the benefits of the reform. From @WhiteHouse (February 27, 2010).	76
Figure 42. Invitation to attend President Obama's town hall meeting in George Mason University. From TWH Facebook feed (March 19, 2010).	76
Figure 43. As in his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama referenced specific cases to talk of the vast majority. From TWH Facebook feed (March 16, 2010).	77
Figure 44. YouTube served as an open channel to submit questions to President Obama after the State of the Union address. From TWH	79

Facebook account (January 18, 2010).

Figure 45. Invitation to write and discuss Obama's responses in Facebook, in real time (February 2, 2010). 79

Figure 46. Bo, the Obamas' dog, is a constant presence in the White House Facebook account (February 10, 2010). 81

Figure 47. The president meets with Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, two of the Hollywood celebrities that have supported him from the outset. From TWH Facebook account (March 15, 2010). 81

Figure 48. @White House Twitter message linking to a photograph and a chronicle of Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama, a spiritual and political world leader (February 19, 2010). 81

Figure 49. Link to www.LetsMove.org distributed via Facebook. From @WhiteHouse (February 10, 2010) 82

Figure 50. First Lady Michelle Obama engaged in a long and vast campaign to battle child obesity, which added to the national health narrative of her husband's presidential communications during the first quarter of 2010. From the White House Facebook feed (March 8, 2010). 82

Figure 51. First Lady Michelle Obama narrates her personal family experiences and reflects on the importance of the reform for women in a YouTube video. 83

Figure 52. Kathleen Sibelius and Nancy-Ann DeParle were two of the actors that helped craft Obama's voice during the Health Care Reform debate. From the White House Facebook feed (March 5, 2010). 83

Figure 53. Kathleen Sibelius made regular appearances in OFA's channels. She was the pragmatic face of the presidency when dealing with the specifics of the reform. From OFA's Facebook feed (January 9, 2010). 84

List of tables

	Page
Table 1. Keys to understanding the archetypical personae of Barack Obama.	37
Table 2. Characteristics of archetypical figures embodied by Barack Obama.	47

Bibliography

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