The rising influence of social media in politics:

How Barack Obama used social media as a successful campaign tool in the 2008 and 2012 elections

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the rising influence that social media has gained in political campaigns. Barack Obama's use of social media as a successful campaign tool in the 2008 election will be utilized as an example. This will subsequently be compared and contrasted with his re-election campaign in 2012 and the campaign of Mitt Romney. The comparison is important in light of the rapid changes that occurred in the social media environment over the course of one presidential term. The dissertation starts with an introduction of the concept of social media and the theoretical framework consists of theories of agenda setting, framing effects and deliberative democracy. The dissertation will argue that Obama used social media in a new way to gain advantage and popularity as a politician. His campaign enabled his supporters to organize events online and they turned into active volunteers and donors. The ability to collect and analyze data on an extensive scale made it possible for Obama's team to predict which types of people would be persuaded by which forms of content online.

Útdráttur

Markmið þessarar ritgerðar er að kanna aukið vægi félagsmiðla í kosningabaráttum. Í ritgerðinni verður tekið dæmi um skipulagða notkun Barack Obama á félagsmiðlum í kosningabaráttu sinni um forsetaembættið í Bandaríkjunum árið 2008. Notkun hans á félagsmiðlum árið 2008 verður jafnframt borin saman við notkun hans árið 2012 og kosningabaráttu Mitt Romney. Þessi samanburður er mikilvægur í ljósi þeirra verulegu breytinga sem áttu sér stað í umhverfi félagsmiðla á einu kjörtímabili. Í ritgerðinni er fjallað um hugtakið „félagsmiðill" og kenningakaflinn samanstendur af kenningum um dagskrárvald fjölmiðla, innrömmunaráhrif og umræðulýðræði. Færð verða rök fyrir því að Obama hafi notað félagsmiðla á árangursríkan hátt og öðlast í kjölfarið forskot og vinsældir sem stjórnmálamaður. Helstu niðurstöður eru að með nýstárlegu skipulagi í kosningabaráttu hafi stuðningsmenn Obama sjálfir getað skipulagt atburði í gegnum veraldarvefinn og þeir jafnframt virkjaðir til þess að vera sjálfboðaliðar og styrktaraðilar kosningabaráttu hans. Getan til að greina og safna gögnum á viðtækum mælikvarða gerði það mögulegt að spá fyrir um hvaða tegund af fólki væri hægt að sannfæra, og með hvaða tilteknu gögnum, á netinu.

Formáli

Þessi ritgerð er lokaverkefni mitt til BA prófs í stjórnmálafræði við Háskóla Íslands. Hún er metin til 12 eininga (ECTS) af 180 eininga námi í stjórnmálafræði. Ritgerðin var unnin á vormisseri 2014. Leiðbeinandi minn var Jón Gunnar Ólafsson og ég vil þakka honum fyrir gott samstarf, þolinmæði og frábæra leiðsögn. Ég vil þakka móður minni Kristínu Blöndal fyrir ómetanlegan stuðning gegnum námið. Einnig vil ég þakka Unni Maríu Birgisdóttur og Phillip Anderson fyrir aðstoð með yfirlestur á ritgerðinni. Að lokum vil ég þakka Fanneyju Skúladóttur fyrir ánægjulegar lærdómsstundir og kaffidrykkju í Odda.

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1. Introduction

For years politicians have tried using different media tools to gain an advantage in political campaigns. Thomas Jefferson used newspapers, Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the power of radio and John F. Kennedy was the first president that understood the political potential of television. For Barack Obama it was social media. The Obama campaign in 2008 demonstrated how the web could be used as a successful campaign tool to engange and interect with voters. The web was utilized to lower the cost of building a political brand while simultaenously creating a sense of connection and engagement, particularly with his young voters. Obama's campaign with regard to its usage of social meda was innovative yet it did not invent anything entirely new. Instead it took different forms of social networking applications and bolted them together under the banner of a "social movement". It used immense communication capabilities and aggressive database development and created an unforeseen force that helped overturn the Clinton machine in the democratic primaries and later contributed to the win against the Republican nominee John McCain in the presidential race (Carr, 2008).

This dissertation will seek to examine how exactly Barack Obama used social media as a successful campaign tool in the 2008 election. This will subsequently be compared and then contrasted with his re-election campaign in 2012. The comparison is important in light of the rapid changes that occurred in the social media environment over the course of one presidential term. The dissertation will particulary look at the strategic deployment of this new generation of Internet-based information and communication technologies, examining how Obama used social media in a new way to gain advantage and popularity as a politician (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 190-191).

In the first part of the dissertation, there will be a discussion concerning the concept of social media, how to define it and how it has developed. Furthermore, three relevant theories will be introduced in the theoretical framework. The first, agenda setting theory; the idea that the traditional media has for a long time held the power to steer which issues are regarded as prominent and which are simply boycotted. It can be argued that the rising influence of social media is giving a greater voice to the public and thus a better opportunity for people, not simply the media, to influence what is considered important on the current agenda. Secondly, the theory of framing will be discussed. It is sometimes referred to as

"second level agenda setting" and focuses on how news media coverage shapes mass opinions by elaborating news material how they see fit. When an issue is frequently covered in the media, the citizens start perceiving it as more important then the onces that get lesser coverage (Coleman, et al 2009, 147).

Lastly Jürgen Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy will be considered in regards to the discussion on how social media has sometimes been referred to as a vehicle of democracy; that it fosters decentralized control instead of hierarchical elite control and can be seen as a digital public sphere. The theoretical framework will conclude with a discussion of whether the increasing popularity of social media leads to more participatory democracy (Meraz 2009, 382).

As discussed, it can be argued that Obama used social media in a new and tactical way in his campaign strategy in 2008. Chapter three will evaluate how exactly he used social media in a different way than his opponents; how it helped him raise money and develop countless numbers of volunteers that felt empowered to make a difference; and how he managed to turn everyday citizens into eager advocates, donors and volunteers using the World Wide Web as a weapon in his campaign movement (Aaker & Chang 2009, 1-19).

The fourth chapter examines the development of social media from 2008 until 2012, the major technological changes that occurred in the social media field during only one presidential term and how social media gained more popularity in the political arena with increased number of users. It will look at Obama's strategy in using social media in his re-election campaign and how it differed from his previous social media strategy. The differences between Obama's and Republican party nominee Mitt Romney's usage of social media tools will be compared, which precedes a discussion concerning why Mitt Romney may have failed to achieve the same success that Obama did.

The references used to construct the arguments presented in this dissertation are mostly online published material concerning the subject. This includes academic books, peer reviewed articles and various other online articles which were related to the topic

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will begin with an introduction to the key term of this dissertation: *social media*. The origins of the concept will briefly be presented and its advancement through the years examined. To understand what the concept of social media stands for it is important to separate it from closely related concept such as "web 2.0" and "user generated content". The role and rising influence of social media in the political arena is a growing phenomenon and it can be argued that social media is gaining more influence in politics every year. Therefore a look into how social media has become a political tool in campaigns to attract a broader group of voters will be discussed (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 60-61).

The theories covered in this framework are both mass communication theories and theories on democracy; both approaches are relevant when discussing the subject matter of this dissertation since social media disseminates information rapidly and is highly participatory. Subsequently, agenda setting theory will be introduced; agenda setting is important with regard to the topic in light of the influential power that comes with being able to choose which issues are high on the agenda. The more frequently a specific issue gets covered on the news, the more prominently the issue will be regarded as important in other media sources and in society as a whole. It can be argued that the rising influence of social media has given a greater voice to the public, thus an enhanced role in deciding which topics become prominent on the agenda (Coleman, et al 2009, 147).

The second theory up for discussion is often called framing effects but has sometimes been referred to as "second level agenda setting". Framing effects refers to how the media has the power to shape our ideas on issues by elaborating news material how they see fit. Therefore what is on the agenda has a built in perspective from the media (Aaker & Chang 2009, 1-19). The theoretical framework will end with a discussion of whether the increasing popularity of social media leads to more participatory democracy using Jürgen Habermas' theory about deliberative democracy (Meraz 2009, 682).

2.1 Introduction to social media; from traditional media to web 2.0

The earth's population is around 7.1 billion people. The number of internet users increases daily and the same can be said about social media users. Nearly 25% of the population today

uses some sort of social media sites. An infographic look at the 2013 global internet, mobile and social engagement, carried out by Wearesquared.com; showed the rapid increase in social media users; from 1.47 billion users in 2012 to 1.73 billion in 2013. This is an 18% increase in one year only and it has even been predicted that the number of social networking audience will reach 2.55 billion by 2017 (Ahmad, 2013).

The internet started out as a giant bulletin board system (BBS) that allowed its users to exchange messages, news, software and data. The rising popularity of social media and its platform to facilitate information exchange between users can therefore be seen as an evolution back to the internet's roots. However, with the technical advances over the past 20 years, and a different form of virtual content sharing and more popularity, social media is clearly becoming ever more powerful and influential than the BBS of the late 1970's (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 60).

The concept of social media first appeared around the millennium. To understand the formal definition of the term it is important to draw up an explanation of two related concepts that are frequently named in conjunction with it. The first one is referred to as "web 2.0" and the second one "user generated content" (UGC). Social media is built on web 2.0, a term that is used to describe the significant changes that occurred on the World Wide Web around the millennium. It appeared quite recently and was first used in 2004 when describing a new way in which software developers started to utilize the World Wide Web. Instead of content and applications simply being created and published by individuals they were continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative manner. The term web 1.0 was the predecessor of web 2.0 and was used to describe the World Wide Web before these changes. Applications such as personal web pages, encyclopedia Britannica online, and the idea of content publishing therefore belong to the era of web 1.0. They were subsequently replaced by wikis, blogs, and other collaborative projects when web 2.0 emerged (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 60-61).

User generated content is a recently established term that achieved increasing popularity in 2005 when describing publicly available forms of media content that was created by users. It focuses on all the different ways in which people can use social media. Users generated content needs to fulfill three requirements to be considered as such according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Firstly it has to be published on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site. It also

needs to show a certain amount of creative effort and finally it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61).

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that are built both on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 but also the creation and exchange of user generated content. There are various types of social media within this general definition, e.g. Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are all part of this large group of different social media platforms. Social media is in other words where users can participate, create and share content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61).

The World Wide Web has given the public new ways to access information. It can therefore be argued that people have become less dependent upon traditional media outlets such as printed media for information about current events. The public has in a way become its own medium, by sharing information on social media (Thevenot 2007, 287-289). One could argue that with the increased popularity of social media it is making traditional media outlets outdated to a certain extent. It has become easier for social media to gain a critical role as agenda setters and to steer the public discourse, thus coming closer to becoming a prominent media source in its own right.

2.2 Agenda setting theory and framing effects

Different sources of media outlets play a significant part in our everyday life. Whether at work, home, or simply standing in a public place one is never far from being exposed to some sort of media. It disseminates information to us daily in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, through our mobile phones, the internet or through other modern media sources such as social media. With various forms of new communication technologies coming into sight daily we are constantly being exposed to new types of media (Hodkinson 2011, 1-2). As illustrated before, social media is an active and fast moving domain which is changing rapidly. One might think that social media and traditional media are poles apart but in fact they are closely connected (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 61-68).

When the World Wide Web made its entrance into the everyday lives of people, traditional media outlets such as newspapers also transferred on to the internet. Either they did so exclusively or in combination with their traditional form. The media is effective when it comes to informing the public about which issues are important at a given time and the

power of the media lies in how they can choose themselves what issues are discussed or boycotted. Agenda setting theory focuses on the ability the media has in influencing the topics that are on the public's agenda. When an issue is frequently and prominently covered in the media, the citizens will start perceiving it as more important than the ones that get lesser coverage (Coleman, et al 2009, 147).

The roots of this mass communication theory can be traced back the year 1922, when Walter Lippmann argued that the news media constructs the public's view of the world. Since then contemporary scholars have greatly expanded that idea (Coleman, et al 2009, 147). Agenda setting theory was subsequently developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their study of the 1968 presidential elections or "The Chapel Hill study". In their study they managed to show how the media determines the public's opinions on issues, proving a strong correlation between what the media covered as the key election issues and what the voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, regarded to be the primary issues in the elections. The findings in the Chapel Hill study indicated a strong correspondence between different media outlets, such as newspapers, magazines and television. McCombs and Shaw managed to show that the priority issues on the news start to be considered as the priority issues of the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Since the Chapel Hill study the agenda setting model has been replicated in over 400 studies, covering a wide variety of issues and extending to broad range of countries (McCombs 2004, 36). When editors, newsroom staff, or broadcasters decide to present news, they are playing a significant role in shaping political reality, which in return plays an important factor in political campaigns. When it comes to politics, the media can set the agenda for a campaign by choosing a candidate that will receive more coverage than another and particular topics to cover (Baran & Dennis 2011, 294-295)

Media sources give the public clues about which issues are considered to be the grand issues facing society today. They do this by displaying news in a certain manner. The news that is considered to be significantly more important gets a superior placement in the newspaper is headlined on websites or receives the cover of a magazine. However, news that end up in the less visible sections of the papers or gain less coverage in general end up being viewed as less important in the public's eye (McCombs 2004, 2).

The media landscape is changing rapidly and it is therefore important to address the applicability of agenda setting theory to the new media environment. Interactive web

applications are gaining more influence and traditional media is no longer the singular agenda setter. Online networking sites like social media sites and blogs are not bound by the bureaucratic routines and sources like the traditional media. That gives them opportunity to report through the dynamic, real time assemblage of relevant opinions and perspectives shared by other online media outlets (Meraz 2009, 700-702).

With regard to agenda setting, the media also holds the power to be able to set the perspective on current issues which results in them being framed in a certain way. This has been called framing effects (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 65). The public does not have the ability to be up to speed with everything that is on the daily agenda. That is why some trusts in the media to inform them on important issues with reliable and detailed information. Democracy is partly based on the rights of the public to accurate information. But even though the information presented in the media can be accurate, it might not be impartial. Since the media choose which issues are covered they can also choose if they want to interpret news material in a positive or negative manner (Coleman, et al 2009, 147).

In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* from 2009 it is discussed how negative news seem to have greater impact on people's lives than positive news; that negative news coverage generally has the tendency to become more unambiguous and newsworthy (Entman, et al 2009, 165). Multiple studies have shown that negatively framed messages have greater impact than positively framed messages. It is thus not surprising that the media has a tendency to discuss events in a negative light. Therefore it can be argued that it is more difficult to get positive coverage than negative coverage (O'Neill & Harcup 2009, 165).

This is of course very much at odds with those who have a vested interest in improving their image, such as politicians. In recent years politicians have shown an interest in taking advantage of social media instead of using the traditional media. That way they can get their opinions across and reach out to the public without having to deal with editors or reporters. Since politicans can not control the coverage that they get in the traditional media they tend to use social media sites to improve their image. Using social media themselves they can control how quickly and efficiently the news reaches the public and at the same time they can promote a positive publicity about their campaigns. It can be argued that having politicians turning to social media has furthermore opened the debate between them and the public, as politicians and the public can ask questions and get answers to them quickly and easily online. Participation and collaboration is one of the main ideologies for

social media as previously discussed. It is accessible for everybody online who seeks to obtain information rapidly or make a contribution to the debate (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, 65). It can therefore be argued that social media has somewhat paved the way for a better deliberative democracy processes and a more open dialogue (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 193-194).

2.3 Deliberative democracy and social media

As previously discussed there has been an increasing interest in using social media as a political tool in the recent years. Political leadership seems to be more personalized with a help from web 2.0, with politicians trying to be more accessible through social networking sites hoping to increase their popularity among voters. When the public is not active or doesn't engage in political discussions, it weakens democracy. The World Wide Web has created a new form of platform for public participation. It has forged a new way for people to participate in politics (Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson 2007, 45-60).

Jürgen Habermas is well recognized for his theory on deliberative democracy and the public sphere. He belonged to the so called Frankfurt School and his writings have been critical for theoretical discussions regarding democracy (Boham & Rehg 1997, 36). According to the ideas of Habermas, the public sphere is a neutral social space for critical debate among people who gather to discuss matters freely that concerns them as a whole. Political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and citizens deliberate about their common affairs. The public sphere is open and accessible for the public. Political public spheres include media that monitor and criticize the state, social movements and groups that take political actions (Habermas 1991, 27-31).

Deliberative democratic public sphere theory has become increasingly popular when examining internet-democracy. Advocates of this theory see the Internet as a platform for deliberative democracy leading to the formation of rational public opinion. According to many researchers, practitioners, and internet-democracy commentators, the internet is a deliberative digital public sphere which can be an ideal place for increased participation in politics (Şen 2012, 490).

The World Wide Web provides an opportunity for interaction and serves as a prerequisite in the deliberative process as a research tool. Social networking outlets

encourage freedom of expression and with the vast number of websites information becomes more accessible. The web has sometimes been referred to as a ''deliberative space'' that can be very democratic (Boham & Rehg 1997, 36). Jürgen Habermas suggests that information, citizenship, government, and the public sphere are interconnected through media (Habermas 1991, 147-147). Looking at web 2.0 and social media from the Habermas' public sphere perspective, they can be seen as "facilitators" of a deliberation space where people can exchange their ideas and thoughts openly and freely. In regards to this a new concept called "cyber- democracy" has been introduced, as a techno cultural goal that intends to create a better functioning public sphere. This is achieved by giving people access to political advice, criticism, and representation through the mass communication media (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 194).

Political life is becoming increasingly ubiquitous with web 2.0 since it fosters a wider array of ways for the public and private life to take place. With new communication technologies and social infrastructure, the thread between the public and private life are becoming more blurry (Cogburn and Vasquez 2011, 194). The public sphere is therefore subject to substantial changes. Some have even gone so far as to argue that it is on the verge of extinction, with the computer-mediated communication landscape getting more powerful and that it has taken the place of coffeehouse discourses (Boeder, 2005).

Web 2.0 and social media have a great potential to empower citizens and allowing them to effect change. Some scholars have even gone so far as to mark the web 2.0 as a new "arena for participation in public life''. The internet could therefore be seen as an efficient political instrument where free and open discourse within a vital public sphere plays a decisive role (Gimmler 2001, 21). Social networking is connecting people directly in ways that were not possible before. Web 2.0 therefore becomes a tool that can empower citizens to take collective action and effect change (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 193-194).

It can be argued that social media has created a new political dialogue. It has taken the power of political messaging away from the traditional mass media model and has instead put it into the peer-to-peer public discourse. It has allowed information and opinions to travel across networks allowing different people to participate as opinion leaders (Rutledge, 2013). Social media does not create democracy itself, but it can encourage people to be involved in community discussion through social media (Shirkey, 2011). With regard to democracy, the potential of social media lies in its support of the civil society and the public

sphere. It can be seen as a platform for national liberation and pro-democracy movements (Şen 2012. 490). In the following chapters Obama's utilization of social media will be examined. It will demonstrate how he managed to use social media as a successful campaign tool, increasing his popularity as a politican. It will also be demonstrated how Mitt Romney failed to achieve the same success that Obama did in his usage of these same tools.

3. Obama and the 2008 presidential election

It can be argued that a primary understanding of communication can be the core of a politician's arsenal. With the rapid development of the communication landscape discussed in the previous chapter, a smart approach can therefore be of vital importance (Nations, 2008). Barack Obama did exactly that, he harnessed the power of social media and used it in a tactical way to increase his popularity and gain support from voters who eagerly advocated for him (Rutledge, 2013).

This chapter will examine how Barack Obama used social media as an effective campaign tool in the 2008 election (Rutledge, 2013). Many previous presidential candidates had used social media sites to some extent in their campaigns, but it can be argued that Obama used social media in a new effective way, as his leading campaign tool (Cogburn & Vazquez 2011, 190-191). The 2008 election can be seen as the first in the United States' history where all candidates actively tried to connect directly with the American voters through social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Myspace (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). This gave the 2008 election a new never before seen technological aspect.

This chapter will focus on the deployment of this new generation of internet-based information and communication technologies, examining how Obama used social media to gain an advantage and increase his popularity as a politician (Cogburn & Vazquez 2011, 190-191). The chapter also emphasizes the ways Obama influenced the young generation through social media sites and how it helped him slingshot his campaign to success (Aaker & Chang 2009, 1-19).

3.1 How Obama utilized social media to gain popularity

When Barack Obama gave the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention it drew attention and with his victory in the Illinois U.S. Senate Democratic primary in March 2004 he became a notable politician within the national Democratic Party (Clayton 2007, 51 & 55). Obama started using web 2.0 and social media early in his political career; during his campaign for the US Senate seat in 2004 he used a personalized campaign website and was

active in the blogosphere (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 200). He regularly drew crowds of people to his campaign events, which resulted in speculations about his presidential future.

After only 2 years of serving as a U.S Senator, Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency in 2007. His campaign message included hope that transcends race and an attempt to bring a divided country closer together. Dewey Clayton, the author of *The Audacity of Hope*, an article in the *Journal of Black Studies* argues that Obama had a unique and charismatic style that rose above the political stereotype. This connected him easily with a broad group of voters from different racial and social backgrounds (Clayton 2007, 51 and 55).

While many other politicians were attracted by the web, their interest tended to be focused on how much money they could raise, however Obama's campaign realized that the technology could be used in new ways to increase political interest and engagement among its users (Carr, 2008). The young demograpics which were active on social media were an important part of Obama's success in 2008 and his campaign capitalized a strong tie between technology and youth voters (Polantz, 2008).

Every possible presidential candidate has developed an idea to improve the future of the country. Emphasis has varied from domestic issues to international issues, both business and military related. Obama's rhetoric was hope and change. He had idealistic ideas and he called for a new agenda instead of focusing his views on partisan issues of the old agendas (Asante 2007, 6-7). His campaign messages were well suited for targeting the young demographics at the time. Jonathan Kopp, who worked as a partner with SS+K the integrated communication agency that managed Obama's youth communication efforts in 2008, mentioned that his team had done numerous research which focused on the young demographics. Their research revealed that young people were desperate for a change in the political athmosphere ever since the Iraq war and the number of registered young voters from the age 18 to 25 in the USA had been growing since the millennium (Mach, 2009). It can thus be argued that his campaign messages of hope and change appealed well to the young demographics at the given time (Tran, 2008).

The Obama campaign in 2008 was dedicated on making his image online seem authentic. His Facebook page was made detailed and youthful, bringing a personal connection to the social web (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). A thorough outcome fom an MSNBC poll conducted in the democratic primaries showed that Obama seemed popular among

young voters ever since the democratic primaries. In the survey Obama won 57% of the votes among the respondents age 17-29, while Hillary Clinton, his democratic primary opponent, only got 11% of the youth votes in the same survey (Tran, 2008). It can be argued that first Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries and later John McCain in the presidential race, were not as engaged with the youth audience as Obama was; that they were perhaps not agressive enough in their usage of social media (Alexandrova, 2010). There was a difference in their campaign strategies that was influential when it came to social media; Obama frequently emphasized that the campaign was "about you", telling people that they could have real power to bring about change, while Hillary Clinton's campaign seemed more focused on her as a candidate. This was apparent e.g. when she announced her candidacy. There she stated "I'm in and I'm in to win" instead of putting emphasis on words like "you", "we", "us", or "our" like Obama's campaign did. John McCain's campaign may not have been as focused on himself as a candidate as Clinton's was, but some have argued that he devoted to much of his time attacking his opponents, therefore making to many of his messages about how Obama was "the wrong" candidate (Alexandrova, 2010).

In the spring of 2008 researchers from the Harvard Institute of Politics asked young voters their main reason for supporting their candidate. The respondents had to articulate their reasons themselves. The majority who supported Obama named "need for change" as a reason for their support. Some spoke of his "character" while others mentioned "hope and unity" as reasons for their support. Those who supported other candidates in the same election named "experience" or "political party" as their main reason. From this it can be argued that Obama was more successful in approaching the young online demographics, this can be attributed to his campaign's communication strategy. His campaign slogans had reached the voters; his message had been disseminated well and the fact that the voters had chosen the terms "character" instead of "experience" as a reason for supporting him reflects how he had become an individual for them instead of a distant politician. It's important for politicians to build an image that will resnate well with the public. Obama managed to narrow his image down to something that seemed simple and relatable (Jackson, 2012).

Obama´s 2008 campaign focused mainly on the major social media platforms at the time, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Myspace (Fox, 2012). The campaign put together a web of these influential social networking sites, making it a central platform in Obama's presidential campaign. The main platform was MyBarackObama (MyBo); the first

social media platform for campaign supporters. It had the functions of a lively online community with over 1.5 million registered volunteers. On MyBo users could create profiles and raise money, organize meetings or get together through a Facebook-like interface. The website enabled like-minded people to find each other. It offered the tools to create a personal fundraising page where people could set their own goals. There was also a blog forum which drove substantial traffic to the website (Penenberg, 2013).

The key strategist behind the Obama social networking campaign was the young Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes (Cogburn & Vazquez 2011, 191). Hughes mentioned in 2013: *"It wasn't the technology that won the campaign. It was the people knocking on doors and getting out the vote.*" But, he added*, "Technology enabled them"* (Penenberg, 2013). This was done by developing a sense of community online. The Obama campaign goal was to make sure that people felt as if they belonged to a cyber community and were making a difference (Alexandrova, 2010). According to Hughes, the technology would not have mattered without a movement. What animated the people was that they believed in the candidate (Penenberg, 2013).

Obama's strategy was to give power to the voters through different media tools. It enabled them to use these tools themselves, volunteering, creating online videos or simply blogging (Penenberg, 2013). Obama's campaign in 2008 also decided to reject public funding which was virtually an unknown proposition for a candidate within the Democratic Party. His team instead anticipated that they could raise enough funds online on his website and through the usage of social media (Penenberg, 2013).

MyBo members managed to organize more than 200.000 campaign events leading up to the election. The events did not only boost Obama's base support but it also generated immense funds. The Obama campaign turned to the everyday citizen spreading donations across America and smaller donors were tapped repeatedly. With this tactic of smaller donations the campaign was more invested in its supporters spreading the campaign memes or knocking on doors for support. In February 2008, Obama's campaign had raised about $55 million online without him having attended a single fundraiser (Penenberg, 2013).

Facebook was aware of the sudden role it had gained in American electoral politics. During the 2007 primary campaigns Facebook launched a forum which encouraged online debates about current issues. It also teamed up with the television station ABC for political forums and election coverage. At the same time YouTube and CNN teamed up to hold

presidential debates. These examples show the increased cooperation between traditional media and social media outlets, and how the agenda setting role appears to be shifting from the traditional media being the sole agenda setter. Facebook was sometimes called "pro-Obama" and some have attributed Obama's victory to a "Facebook effect" (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). Some have furthermore stated that the mainstream press was overall very "pro-Obama" and even applauded his negative tactics while others argue that his campaign was well run and easily generated positive coverage (Burns, 2010).

3.2 Social networking to influence young voters.

It can be argued that Barack Obama was an ideal candidate to attract young voters. He was young, energetic and charismatic with a vision that personified change (Mach, 2009). Many pundits were focused on Barack Obama's race and overlooked the success factor that could be related to his powerful techno-demographic appeal. Early in his campaign political pollsters had observed how Obama had been targeting the youth vote by using social media as an integral part of his campaign. According to exit polls taken during the primary elections, Obama had nearly 70% of the votes among young Americans that were 25 or younger. This was the highest percentage since U.S exit polling had begun in 1976. With his strategic usage of social media he had managed to get close to the "Facebook generation". (Asante 2007, 6-7).

By using social media he managed to organize events online and attract crowds of young people during his presidential campaign and he became a frontrunner in inspiring young voters across America. Obama's campaign appeared to have recognized an existing gap between what people thought that government jobs should be about and what they were actually doing; in the case of the Iraq war, Obama decided to take a stand against the war. Many of Obama's opponents could not run against the war since they had voted for it. This distinguished Obama and helped him gain trust from those who felt that the war in Iraq was a betrayal from their political leaders. Of course not all voters felt this way so Obama also had to ensure that he seemed capable of strengthening the American military if necessary. His campaign emphasized the importance of uniting America as a whole and in

the eyes of some online demographics he became a symbol of international peace (Asante 2007, 6-7).

Obama managed to get to the younger voters more effectively than his competitors and it can be argued that an important factor in his success was his personal usage of social media himself. He seemed comfortable with using the technology (Cogburn & Vasquez, 2011, 202). Obama was frequently photographed using his Blackberry, often seen texting and was not only active on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Myspace but also on Flickr, LinkedIn, AsianAve, MiGente and other networking sites (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). It can be argued that Obama appealed better to the youth voters by understanding the web. As mentioned earlier his Facebook page was seemed personal with him listing one of his hobbies as basketball, writing and "loafing w/kids" where the shorthand was aimed at appealing to young voters. At the same time it can be argued that the 72 year old Republican nominee John McCain never managed to connect as well with his Facebook followers. By listing his hobbies as "fishing" he may have seemed old and out of touch with the young people in America. Looking at the statistic results in 2008, Obama had more than 2 million Facebook supporters, while McCain had around 600.000, on Twitter Obama had more than 112.000 supporters who eagerly "tweeted" messages to help him get elected, while McCain only had around 4.600 followers on Twitter (Dutta & Fraser, 2008).

Obama ran his campaign when 89% percent of the people in the USA believed that the country was on the wrong track and significant changes needed to take place. Young people started leaning towards Obama. His campaign was careful not to over market the "Obama brand" to the young voters since that could lead to a weakened trust. For Obama to win the younger demographics over he had to get them registered to vote. The Obama web tactic was to dial down the Obama branding and have a neutral web site – voteforchange.com. The word "change" was used as an allusion and the site made it quick and easy for people to get registered (Mach, 2009).

On the website the campaign linked registration to the issues frustrating U.S citizens. This was intended to motivate action. With the tagline "Don't get mad-Get registered", the campaign motivated action among young citizens that eagerly wanted change and were frustrated about issues such as the Iraq war, health care or gas prices. They convinced young people that if they wanted to make a difference they had to vote. On the website the athmosphere was made personal and less political. The information, tools and opportunities

were laid out online for voters to use as they wanted, on their terms and on their own time. With the youth using the online tools in front of them and a right flow of messages within the social networking sites focusing on issues of concern for young voters, Obama gained a great advantage (Mach, 2009).

3.3 From online activity to ground activism

There was a major shift between the usage of online resources in the 2004 and 2008 elections. According to the findings of a survey by the Pew Research Center, 46% of Americans used the web, emails or texting for news about the presidential campaign in 2008. Roughly 10% said that they had used social media sites such as Facebook and Myspace to engage in political discussions; they used the web to contribute to the debate or to mobilize other citizens to participate. About 35% of American citizens said they had watched political videos online during the 2008 election; this was three times as many as during the 2004 election (Dutta & Fraser, 2008).

The techniques that allowed the Obama 2008 campaign to trancend online activity to ground activism was the fact that the campaign did not only use the web 2.0 and social media tools as a source of information dissemination which was a dominant approach among other candidates, but he also managed to build a geographically distributed virtual community. Obama's grassroots activities were both interpersonal and online. The campaign did not only have a presence of these tools but it also used them to their fullest potential. It used Facebook as an organizing tool, YouTube to communicate and Twitter to send news. Obama's campaign also used additional web 2.0 tools like Flickr to keep supporters updates with pictures from campaign events (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 200-201).

The Obama campaign did not simply create a Facebook fan page, Youtube and Twitter accounts and expect things to take off. Instead it created a movement, fueled by supporters who wanted to engage in the campaign through social media technologies. These technologies became a vehicle in his campaign which connected real people and gave them an accessible way to show their support (Smith & Aaker, 2010).

As mentioned before, the web 2.0 technologies had been around for a while and been used by many politicians prior to the 2008 election, but not as a substantial organizing tool. The Obama 2008 campaign managed to build something that had not been done

before, a virtual mechanism for scaling and supporting community action. The key platform, as previously mentioned, was My.BarackObama.com or "Mybo" and was interactive and made it easy for Obama supporters to create groups online, plan fundraisers or events and also contact other people online and influence them. With the site the campaign reached passionate supporters more affordably and effectively. When the campaign was over volunteers in the Obama campaign had raised over 30 million dollars on fundraising pages alone. The campaign created more than 2 million profiles, formed more than 35.000 groups and posted more than 4000 blogs. This shows the significant collective action that was made by the Obama supporters (McGirt 2009, 1-2). The web became an effective vehicle to foster interaction between Obama and his voters (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 199).

Dewey Clayton, the author of *The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama: A Critical Analysis of Racially Transcendent Strategy,* claims in his book that Obama managed to assemble a grassroot movement from bottom up; that the campaign changed the face of Democracy in America with hundreds of thousands of virtual network citizens drawn to Obama's national community of purpose. That they rallied themselves behind him through social media sites (Clayton 2007, 51-63). Obama's leverage in using web 2.0 as a platform marks a clear and signifcant turning point in electoral politics as a whole. Campaigning shifted from old-style political machines towards the more horizontal dynamics of online social networks. The web has become an ideal platform for genuine grassroots political movements and has transformed the power dynamics in politics. Every citizen can participate in politics since there are no barriers to enter sites such as Facebook and Youtube and the Obama campaign showed how the web could be used for grassroot fundraising (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). In summary, the Obama campaign managed to take old campaign strategies concerning organization, fundrasing and so forth, and transfer them on to the web 2.0 to make them more effective in a contemporary political landscape (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 203).

3.4 The first elected "social media president"

On January 20th, 2009 Senator Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States (Cogburn & Vasquez 2011, 190). The campaign that had commended extraordinary attention and social media frenzy had come to an end. The president's election slogan "Yes we can" suddenly became "Yes we did". The 2008 election and Obama's

role in them can be seen as a triumph for social media and some have even referred to the election as the "social media election" (Hasseldahl, MacMillan & Kharif, 2008).

The utilization of social media has continued to expand rapidly after the 2008 election and politicians rushed to establish an online presence and connect with voters through the World Wide Web following Obama's victory. Simultaneously voters shifted towards the web for political interaction and increased participation (Dutta, 2008). With the rapid development of the social media landscape the element of surprise was gone. Obama's campaign knew that for them to win a second term they had to hold on to their young demographics support. But securing the youth vote was challenging since they were known to be unpredictable as a voting bloc. The bar for a creative implementation of social media strategy had to be set higher than in the previous election (Comart, 2011).

4. The 2012 presidential election

Since the 2008 election, the variety of digital tools available for supporters, candidates and campaigns have exploded. Even though the 2008 election had been referred to by some as "the social media elections" the fact of the matter is that during the election Facebook had less than 100 million users and Twitter had only been around for two years. The four years between elections are a good example of how social media has evolved as a political tool (O'Brien, 2012).

The chapter reviews the development of social media from 2008 elections until 2012. It will examine the new social media platforms that appeared and evaluate the changes in the social media landscape as a whole with the communication landscape becoming denser, more complex and more participatory (Shirkey, 2011). The chapter will discuss Obama's usage of social media in 2012 to his usage in 2008. In addition it will discuss the Republican nominee Mitt Romney's usage of social media tool up to the point when Obama was ree-elected in 2012. It will assess the differences of the two candidates in using these tools and discuss where Romney's faults may have been.

4.1 Rising impact of social media

As mentioned, social media has gone through major changes and has become even more influential since the 2008 election. For instance, Facebook and Twitter grew substantially; Facebook grew from having 100 million users in 2008 to having 850 million users in 2012 (Leuschner 2012, 39). It did not only grow in terms of numbers but also as a global influencer in general terms. In these four years between elections Facebook for example became a prominent marketing place for businesses around the world (Sreenivasan, 2012). The number of Twitter users also went up from previous election and had gone from 6 million users in 2008 to having 500 million users in 2012 (Leuschner 2012, 39). Twitter has become a critical part of candidates' communication strategies and was even used to announce Obama's reelection campaign in 2011 (Sreenivasan, 2012).

A study conducted by MGD Advertising focusing solely on Internet users from the age of 18 and up who used the Internet at least once a month, revealed that the number of people that used the Internet to engage in political campaigns had increased over the

course from 2008 – 2012. It demonstrated that 82% of all adults in 2012 were receiving most of their election news online, compared to only 26% in 2008. This remarkable increase demonstrated again the potential that social media can have in the political domain (Leuschner 2012, 39).

Other changes such as the prevalence of apps and smartphones also occurred in these four years. In the 2008 election only 10% of adult Americans owned a smartphone yet in 2011 a Pew Research internet study reported that the percentage had increased to 35%. Assuredly there were smartphones around in 2008 but the increase of iPhones, Androids, iPads and other tablets changed the way social media was consumed. Many see their smartphones as a vital organ in their life nowadays. They reach for it in bed when they wake up and glance at it before they fall asleep at night. The consumption of digital content thus became higher in the 2012 elections than four years prior (Sreenivasan, 2012).

In 2012 the Obama social media campaign held on to some if its strategies from 2008, such as being persistent in building an online community that could be translated into offline mobilization. However, the 2012 campaign made significant changes as well and embraced new social media tools that had become available and transformed the campaign to more diverse platforms. The campaign also localized its digital messaging even further, notably by adding state to state content pages which were filled with local guidance (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). Instead of focusing primarily on the major social media platforms like in 2008, the Obama 2012 campaign spread across many platforms (Fox, 2012).

New social media sites had appeared and gained popularity as they found their way into political communication strategies for the 2012 election (Leuschner 2012, 39-40). The Obama campaign took the lead in utilizing a variety of these new social media tactics. Since Obama did not have an opponent during the primary elections, the campaign had more resources and time to devote to social media sites than Mitt Romney's campaign did. Obama's campaign appeared on many of these new platforms such as Instagram, which was one of the fastest growing mobile apps on the market during this period. Obama used Instagram to post behind-the-scenes photos from the campaign and he additionally appeared on Spotify where he shared a personal playlist, yet again aiming for a "personal approach" with his supporters as he had done during the 2008 election (Fox, 2012). The campaign furthermore created a Dashboard which was released in May 2012. It was

somewhat of a more evolved version of MyBarackObama.com. The campaign even created a mobile app that was given the name *"Obama for America".* It was an organizing tool that supporters could use to sign up for campaign events, learn about voting or donate money to the campaign. Moreover, the Obama campaign was the first presidential campaign to accept donations through text messages (Fox, 2012).

The 2012 the campaign emphasised the importance of putting the relevant content and conversation on the most effective platform; that way it could encourage more participation from voters. The campaign focused on understanding how each social networking platform could help them with three main goals: The first one being to persuade voters, the second to recruit volunteers and the third goal was raising donations. The campaign had to seem authentic since the risk was that people could simply tune out if they didn't keep them interested (O'Brien, 2012).

When examining Obama's campaign in 2012, it can be argued that the details mattered. The campaign used technologies in new ways, for example by utilizing Twitter to interact with the American public by conducting a "Twitter Town Hall meeting" where Twitter followers could post questions which Obama responded to. A video was aired live from this event on various platforms, including YouTube, creating even more publicity (Leuschner 2012, 40-43). These town halls had occurred before the campaign season had kicked off, but it still demonstrated new ways that Obama's social media team brought to the table (Fox, 2012).

The 2012 election was the first presidential race where two leading candidates went full throttle in their usage of social media and for a good reason. Two out of three internet users in the US were active social media users during this election. 88% of the adults that used social media were registered voters (Ouimet, 2012). Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were leveraging social media to attract the millennial votes and create a buzz of excitement around their campaigns, but their social media strategies had their differences (Felix, 2012).

4.2 How Romney got it wrong?

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney became the Republican nominee and ran for the presidency in 2012. Both Obama and Romney actively fought to gain supporters on social media and increase their popularity as previously discussed. Zac Moffatt, the digital director of Mitt Romney's campaign, mentioned that in 2008 social media had been an auxiliary component of the campaign. Four years later they had realized the influence of the web and had taken a drastically different approach (O'Brien, 2012).

Romney focused mainly on the three of the most prominent social media networks during the 2012 campaign, i.e. Facebook, Twitter and Youtube instead of spreading across more platforms like Obama did. He had major success in his usage of Twitter, especially when his jobs plans were realised on Twitter and a free Kindle copy was offered to whoever re-tweeted the link. This resulted in Romney's jobs plan ending up on the 10 most download list on Kindle for a week (O'Brien, 2012). However, even though Romney was successful in some aspects with regard to using Twitter, a Pew Research survey conducted in 2012 revealed that the Obama campaign had made a better overall use of direct digital messages than Romney's campaign had. The Romney campaign averaged just one tweet per day while the Obama campaign tweeted on average 29 times per day. Obama's campaign also produced twice as many blog posts than Romney and uploaded twice as many YouTube videos (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). It can be argued that Obama's campaign managed to understand that the power of social media lay in the engagement measured by constant content spreadability; Obama logged twice as many Facebook "likes" and had nearly 20 times as many retweets as his opponent Romney. It seemed that with Obama's longer existing social media base, he managed to have a superior reach and his engagement with voters online as a whole was much more active (Rutledge, 2013).

Some have argued that Romney's campaign lagged behind Obama's due to the Republican candidate's less digitally connected audience, i.e. that he had less connected supporters than Obama (Fox, 2012). For example, in 2013 the website Socialbakers which focuses on measuring, comparing and contrasting success in social media campaigns, released a case study focusing on the social media efforts of the Romney for President Campaign. It showed that Romney gained 10 million new fans on Twitter between May 2012 and Election Day, and during the final five months his page seemed to have been higher in

engagement levels, yet Obama significantly outnumbered him in followers (Heisler, 2013). Obama had approximately 19,993,258 followers by the end of the 2012 elections while Romney only had around 1,158,850 followers (Felix, 2012). Even with Romney's strategic deployment of these specific social media tools and actively engaging on the web, Romney lagged behind (Heisler, 2013).

A politicians's goal with regard to public relations is to build an image that will resonate with the public. The public understands when a candidate has a simple and relatable image. This was evident in the case of Obama's 2008 campaign when he narrowed his image down to "Change" and "Hope". Problems occur when the image starts to be portrayed as disingenuous or when the public creates a contradictory image of the candidate. Mitt Romney tried to build an image by using the web. His focus was to try to connect with middle class US citizens, but simple incidents such as when he made a $10,000 bet with his opponent Rick Perry during the 2012 Republican Primary debate made him seem out of touch with the middle class American (Miller 2013, 19-20). Romney cast himself as a moderate, then a committed conservative and back again. This made people concerned about his true identity. Some considered him not to be authentic (Jackson, 2012).

The Romney campaign uploaded significantly more Facebook Photos than Obama (Ouimet, 2012). The photos tended to be of the candidate himself with a large group of people. Obama's photos on the other hand seemed to have a more intimate appeal to them (Miller 2013, 11). Barack Obama had more photos which contained affinity gestures, physical contact and individual interaction. This resulted in Romney seeming more like a distant politician then an everyday citizen (Miller 2013, 39-40). Many of Romney's Facebook photos seemed old fashioned and similar to campaign rallies of the past. The Obamas strategy in uploading more intimate photos seemed to mirror better the everyday Facebook profile. This may have led to him seeming more approachable than his competitor (Miller 2012, 58).

Of course it can not be stated that personal photos necessarily lead to a better campaign strategy but it can be argued that these types of photos make the candidate's online account appear more personal; Thus taking a step away from a stereotypical politician's page. It was crucial for the Romney campaign to connect with the average citizen and gain credibility with the middle class since he had a wealthy executive background. It can therefore be argued that his campaign did not seem to accomplish as good connections with the everyday citizen as Obama's campaign did (Miller 2013, 56).

Obama's campaign successfully managed to portray Romney as a plutocrat business man which was out of touch with the middle class. Romney did not make it difficult with inappropriate remarks surfacing which were captured on video where he dismissed "47%" of Americans who either did not pay taxes or were living off government assistance (Jackson, 2012).

It can be argued that another error for Romney might have been that he devoted too much of his time talking about the economy. Surely the economy may have been a dominating subject for both candidates in the 2012. Yet it was not what the digital voters showed most interest in. It might therefore be argued that his campaign failed to understand who was listening. On average Obama's posts on immigration generated four times the reaction as his economic tweets. The same could be said about Romney's posts on health care or veterans which averaged almost twice as much reaction than his economic messages. It can therefore be argued that the overall digital strategy to target specific voter groups was more successful in Obama's campaign than in Romney's. On the Obama website there were offered more opportunities for constituency groups. He had 18 different groups, such as African American, Women, LGBT, and Latinos. If the online user clicked to join a specific group it led him to receive content specifically targeted to that constituency. The Romney campaign offered no such groups until August 2012 when the campaign added a community's page featuring nine groups (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012).

A final aspect of Obama's online success in 2012 can be related to the increasing sophistication of online data collection. The ability to collect and analyze data on an extensive scale made it possible for Obama's team to predict which types of people would be persuaded by which forms of content. They were able to predict donor's behaviors and mobilize young volunteers to get people out to vote (Rutledge, 2013).

4.3 Obama's reelection; takeaways from the 2012 campaign

The 2012 presidential campaign showed that social media was no longer a "new factor" in political campaigns; it had become an important part of communications with distinctively different approaches than the traditional media (Rutledge, 2013).

It can be argued that it is important for a candidate to build local, regional and national bases to craft messages and reach all segments of the population. This used to be achieved through traditional media outlets and technologies such as newspaper, television and radio. With the advent of the internet, the development of social media and the use of web 2.0 technologies the way campaigns are conducted has reshaped to a large extent (Anderson 2009, 1).

The findings of a *New State of News Media Report* from 2013 indicated the change in the media landscape. In the 2012 presidential race, traditional journalists played a less significant role in shaping what voters heard about the candidates than in the elections prior. In 2000 half of the statements regarding the candidates came from the traditional media and in 2012 only about one quarter of the statements made about candidates came directly from journalists. It can be argued that Obama's campaign team made an overall greater and more successful use of social media than Romney campaign did. Interestingly the conversation in the social media landscape became more negative than positive towards both candidates in the 2012 elections then they had been in 2008 (State of the Media, 2013).

It seems that both candidates in 2012 were quick to grasp the power of new technology; they attempted to use it to convey a sense that they represented a new generation of leadership which was more in touch with what the public wanted (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). However it is clear that Obama managed to gain a greater advantage with his utilization of the social media tools available in 2012.

Discussion

The rising influence of social media is an interesting and important subject to examine in relation to contemporary political campaigns. Obama's campaign in 2008 used social media as an influential tool to better engage with the voters. As previously mentioned, Obama's 2008 campaign staff emerged as "experimental innovators", giving the 2008 election a new technological aspect (Rutledge, 2013). However, in the 2012 election the social media landscape had rapidly developed and social media had become an important and central part of contemporary campaigning.

The major takeaway from the 2008 campaign was that Obama's campaign put most of its focus towards the major social media platforms, i.e Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Myspace (Fox, 2012). Obama also made the first robust social media platform which was Mybarackobama.com (MyBo). With MyBo the campaign came up with a lively and active online community where supporters could create profiles, organize meetings and its members managed to generate extensive funds for the campaign without creating the traditional fundraisers. Obama's campaign also rejected public fundings which was a virtually unknown proposition from a Democratic candidate and instead focused much of its effort on raising their funds online (Penenberg, 2013).

It can be argued that Obama got to the millennials through social networking. His image on the web appealed better to the youth voters than his competitors and his Facebook page seemed to be personal and youthful (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). Obama was also frequently seen using the technology himself, bringing a personal connection to the social web, thus making his messages online seem more authentic (Cogburn & Vasquez, 2011, 202).

The Obama campaign managed to turn online activity to ground activism by not only utilizing web 2.0 and social media as a source of information dissemination, which was a dominant approach among many candidates, but furthermore he built a geographically distributed virtual community. His grassroots activities were both interpersonal and online. He used these new social media tools to their fullest potential; Facebook as an organizing tool, YouTube to communicate videos and Twitter to send news (Cogburn and Vasquez 2011. 200-201). The Obama campaign created a virtual mechanism for scaling and supporting community action (McGirt 2009, 1-2).

When comparing Obama's usage of social media in 2008 to his usage in the 2012 election it highlights the major changes that occurred in only one election term. The social media landscape had become denser, more complex and participatory (Shirkey, 2011). Obama's 2012 campaign did not only focus on the major social media platforms like they did in 2008, but it furthermore took the lead in utilizing a variety of new social media tactics that had become available and the campaign therefore transformed itself to more diverse platforms (Fox, 2012). The campaign emphasized the importance of putting the relevant content to the most appriate platform, hoping to encourage more participation from voters (O'Brien, 2012). The campaign also localized its digital messaging greatly by adding state to state content pages which were filled with local guidance (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). Obama's campaign moreover continued to hold on to being persistent in building an online community that could be translated into offline mobilization.

The theory of agenda setting which was discussed in chapter two; focuses on how the media can influence which topics are on the current agenda at each time (McCombs 2004, 2). It can be argued that with the rise of social media the gap between the mainstream media and citizen journalism on the World Wide Web has become smaller. Citizen created content played an influential role in the 2008 as well as in the 2012 elections, as people went from being passive consumers of the media to becoming active content creators. People actively engaged in campaigns by posting stories, pictures or videos and they did not merely consume campaign information, they also created it (Johnsson, 2011). It can therefore be argued that the public has in a way become its own medium (Thevenot 2007, 287-289). Even though traditional media still played an important role in informing the American citizens about the elections, social media (and the general public as a result) had become an important agenda setter as well (Johnsson, 2011).

As previously discussed, framing effects can be linked to when the media focuses its attention on certain events and places them within a specific field meaning. Public perception gets formed by the inquiry and reports that come from the media. They become instrumental in framing narratives and storylines (Spagnolo, 2009).

It is interesting to examine the framing effects of the 2012 campaign when the two leading candidates, Obama and Romney, were framed by their campaigns in different ways. Romney seemed to have been framed as a patriotic statesman and his campaign photos were full of symbols of patriotism and campaign paraphernalia, while Obama was framed as

a compassionate candidate, with more intimate photos of him with his voters, making him seem like a modern family man whom people could relate to (Miller, Cooper, Khang & Mullins 2013, ii).

It has been argued that the mainstream media was overall very "Pro-Obama" when he ran in 2008 (Burns, 2010) and some even went so far as to attributing Obama's victory to a "Facebook effect" (Dutta & Fraser, 2008). David Halperin, who maintains *Time*'s political website "The Page", compared two different *New York Times articles* as to show the divergent coverage that Obama and McCain received from the media in 2008. The examples he emphasized were two profiles that the paper ran on the potential first ladies; the first one being a story about Cindy McCain. The coverage was vicious and casted her in a very negative light. It did not focus on her work and instead the paper cherry-picked every negative thing it could find and put it in the coverage according to Halperin. However, the story about Michelle Obama seemed as a front-page endorsement of what an exceptional person Michelle was. Thus making it seem like the *New York Times* was rooting for Obama. So it has been argued that Obama's victory was linked to positive media coverage without the focus being on social media. Others argue that his campaign was overall simply well run, including its web presence, and thus it could be the reason for the press applauding even his negative tactics (Burns, 2008).

Obama's campaigns in both 2008 and 2012 would not have run as fluidly if it was not for the movement behind them. Both campaigns were fueled by supporters who eagerly engaged through the social media technologies which connected real people and gave them an accessible way to show their support (Smith & Aaker, 2010).

In a way social media has become a platform for public participation, with new communication tools it has forged a new way for people to participate in politics (Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson 2007, 45-60). It is interesting to examine social media with Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy in mind. It can be argued that social media can enable the public to participate in democratic debate and decision-making processed through the World Wide Web. As mentioned before, it has been argued that political life has become increasingly ubiquitous with social media. That it fosters a wider array of ways for the public and private life to take place, making the line between public and private life more blurry (Cogburn and Vasquez 2011, 194). When examining social media from Habermas' public sphere perspective they can be viewed as "facilitators" of a deliberation space where people

can exchange their ideas freely. Social media has given great empowering potential to citizenship; opportunities to engage and allowing them to effect change in the political field (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 194. 2011). This could be seen in the rising movements on social media in the 2008 and 2012 elections. With technological changes it has been made easier for people to engage in political campaigns (Smith & Aaker, 2010). The study conducted by MGD advertising which was discussed earlier in the dissertation revealed that the number of people who use the internet to engage in political campaigns had increased from 2008-2012 (Leuschner 2012, 39). Social media sites have attracted numerous young volunteers that feel empowered to make a difference (Aaker and Chang, 2009). Obama's use of social media in his campaigns was in a way groundbreaking for political campaigns. With the rapid development of the communication landscape it is important for politicians to keep in mind the new forms of social media platforms that will undoubtedly surface. They have to come up with new approaches to keep up with the times and to understand how they can use these platforms for their benefit.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, the main objective of this dissertation was to examine how Barack Obama used social media as a successful campaign tool in the 2008 elections. Subsequently comparing and contrasting it with his re-election campaign in 2012. The comparison was important in light of the rapid changes that occurred in the social media environment over the course of just one presidential term. The dissertation particularly looked at the strategic deployment of this new generation of Internet-based information and communication technologies and examined how Obama used social media in a new way to gain advantage and popularity as a politician

In this dissertation, an original contribution to the academic discussion on social media was made by comparing Obama's usage of social media tools in 2008 and again in 2012. It was emphasized how Obama used social media as an innovative campaign tool in 2008, creating a new type of technological aspect to the election. It can be argued that he managed to use social media to its fullest potential. The Obama campaign lowered the cost of building a political brand while creating a sense of connection with young voters. With help from his volunteers on his main platform MyBo he managed to generate gigantic funds without attending fundraisers (Penenberg, 2013).

As discussed in the dissertation, the role and rising influence of social media increased significantly in one election term and in 2012 many new social media platforms had appeared. The dissertation discussed the changes in the social media landscape and emphasised that even though the Obama campaign held on to many of its strategies from 2008, it also embraced new technologies available (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). The Obama campaign in 2012 emphasised putting the relevant content and conversation on the most strategic platforms. The campaign focused on understanding how each platform could help them achieve their three main goals. The first one being persuading voters, the second to recruit volunteers and the third one raising donations (O'Brien, 2012). The comparison of the examples of Obama and Romney demonstrated how Romney failed to build an image that resonated with the public. That even with an ambitious social media strategy he did not manage to connect as well as Obama with the online demographics.

By utilizing the agenda setting framework it was demonstrated that social media is gaining importance as an agenda setter when discussing political campaigns. That people are not merely consuming campaign information but creating it and the public has in a way become its own medium online (Thevenot 2007, 287-289). It was discussed how social media has gained more popularity in the political arena with increased number of voters.

It should be emphasized that the dissertation only discussed Obama's and Romney's usage of these new technological tools. In order to construct a plausible theory on the true progression of social media in politics today it would be necessary to evaluate additional examples of other politicians using the same tools. It can be argued that it is important to examine the concept of the social media further in order to understand the technological changes in the media landscape and thus the contemporary political landscape. Social media has gained an increasingly prominent role in contemporary politics and it is not possible to reach a broad final conclusion on the importance of social media simply by looking at the 2008 and 2012 elections in the United States.

While the examples of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney may not fully cover the status of social media in the contemporary media landscape, it can be argued that these examples demonstrate how influential social media has become in the political domain. By examining the rapid development of social media the dissertation demonstrated that it has become a relevant force in today's political discourse and its influence cannot be ignored. In regards to this it might be interesting to study how future campaigns, such as the possible campaign of Hillary Clinton in 2016, will use social media and whether they will continue to build on the foundations of Barack Obama's successful campaigns in 2008 and 2012.

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