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Election 2008: Social Software and User Generated Media

3 October 2008

Text Media: A Comparative Analysis of Contextual Importance

The 2008 presidential election has inspired people to produce and distribute an abundance of political media outside of both the political campaigns and the traditional publishing and broadcasting industries. These political statements have covered a range of audio and visual media, but simple text-based examples have also played a prominent role. Despite the powerful tools available to users for the creation of advanced media, the production of text media still has the lowest barriers to entry – any user can copy, paste, edit, repurpose, forward, or publish a piece of text with relatively little special software. In addition, the media often exists in places that recipients will already see, so they do not need to download/open attachments or visit external links since.

The specific channel in which a piece of text media is distributed informs the intent, content, and opportunities for discussion. In this paper I will examine three examples of text media produced and distributed outside of traditional channels. First, I will consider a widely forwarded email claiming that Joe Biden will be replaced by Hillary Clinton as Barack Obama's running mate. Second, I will discuss a post on Reddit.com titled "Vote up if you think that voters need to see the list of books Palin tried to ban." Finally, I will examine a popular Twitter meme in which Sarah Palin is humorously attributed sarcastically impressive and untrue abilities. In each example I will explore the ways in which the motivations of the creators, the tools for distribution, and

the opportunities for discussion are defined by the context in which they exist.

An email began circulation in mid-September that had the following text, often preceded by the subject line "Don't Be Surprised if this Really Happens!"

On or about October 5th, Biden will excuse himself from the ticket, citing health problems, and he will be replaced by Hillary. This is timed to occur after the VP debate on 10/2.

There have been talks all weekend about how to proceed with this info. Generally, the feeling is that we should all go ahead and get it out there to as many blog sites and personal email lists as is possible. I have already seen a few short blurbs about this – the 'health problem' cited in those articles was aneurysm. Probably many of you have heard the same rumblings.

However, at this point, with this inside info from the DNC, it looks like this Obama strategy will be a go. Therefore, it seems that the best strategy is to get out in front of this Obama maneuver, spell it out in detail, and thereby expose it for the grand manipulation that it is.

So, let's start mixing this one up and cut the Obamites off at the pass – send this info out to as many people as you can – post about it on websites and blogs – etc.

Some instances had additional text that appeared to have been added later, saying things such as, "Russ Limbough[sic] has been saying this too............" but none list a credible source for the theory. General speculation that Biden would step down and be replaced by Clinton began as early as September 5th, when a blogger named Blogust wrote, "Look, I am not much of a conspiracy honk... I'm not! But I do believe the Dems are capable and willing to conspire to get Hillary on the ticket."[1] Blogust continues on to

criticize the ethics of such a move, but is not as critical of the possibility as is the author of the email. On September 10 [th], Biden himself suggests that Clinton, "might have been a better pick than me."[2] This gaffe is likely to have inspired further speculation, and the email it its most popular form had appeared by September 15th.[3] It later appeared in a variety of other blogs, but the content remained as it had been in the email.

The email was forwarded among friends and family, often to less than a dozen people at a time. People are able to choose to which of their contacts the email will be sent, and there are both political and social motivations for each sender. The email refers to the proposed plan as a "grand manipulation" and refers to "Obamites" antagonistically, suggesting that the author holds a conservative/anti-Obama viewpoint. The email is most likely intended to sway independents away from a faltering Obama (who the email implies is concerned about his campaign) and toward the right. In addition, the email might energize members of the conservative base, both those who strongly dislike Clinton and those who are encouraged by the email's assurances that the party is active and strategizing. Conversely, liberal readers might not even read the tactic as a negative reflection of Obama – Andy Ostroy of the Huffington Post writes, "Show me a Democrat, today, who'd dump Obama for McCain if Biden was replaced with Clinton? They don't exist."[4] Ostroy, however, fails to consider the aforementioned newly energized conservative base or the independents who had been drawn to the left by Obama's 'change' message but might be pushed back to the right by if Clinton were on the ticket.

In addition to the political motivations for sending the email, there are strong social incentives for users who liked the email to forward it to their friends. In the case that Biden is actually dropped for Hillary as the email predicts, each sender receives a

small credibility boost for being able to say 'I called it.' The first person to email it to a particular social circle is also rewarded with social status for being 'more connected' to the larger world. In addition, each of the senders can modify the text of the email before they forward it and these additions can give the message credibility (even if fabricated) and add a personal touch that is relevant to a particular social circle. Finally, small conversations can occur through the reply-all functionality, and people who receive the email in one social circle and forward it to another can help propagate information back some number of levels towards the source (although time delays make each successive iteration less likely). Individuals can take information learned from others in the latter group and be the first to send it to the former group, both furthering a political agenda and building social status.

Similarly, Reddit.com is a website designed to fill its users' desires to quickly learn of relevant online content and further their political agendas. The main page is a list of user-submitted posts that primarily consist of a headline with a link, an adjacent set of up or down arrows, and a score. Registered users can vote a post up or down if they like it, and in the future the site will a) show them more sites voted up by people with similar voting histories and b) make it more likely that other users see the sites that they voted up.[5] Most posts link to an external page, but some, like the "Vote up if you think that voters need to see the list of books Palin tried to ban," link only the associated page of comments. This particular post was submitted on September 4th, 2008 by the user 'meloveyoulongtime,' has 5270 up votes, 1312 down votes, and thus has 3958 points (a relatively high number for a post on Reddit).[6]

Although Reddit seems at first glance to be similar to a traditional news website,

its fully user-driven content selection process breaks it out of traditional models and requires further analysis. First, the distribution of content from one user to others is both similar and different from the capabilities offered by email. Just like a user might forward an email with which he or she agrees, a Reddit user can 'forward' a post to an unknown group by voting it up because other uses will see the post in their lists as a result of that vote. Unlike email, however, a Reddit user can actively make it less likely that other users will see a post by voting it down. Although an email user can choose to forward all or only part of a message, a Reddit user must vote up, down, or not at all for any given post and there is no opportunity to modify it (although the Reddit user could repost it with the changes made).

meloveyoulongtime's post is of particular interest because it links only to itself and has no other associated content; the entire purpose of the post is its own visibility to the community. The post acts a viral meme with a very small political payload, and it was presumably posted with intent to tell the Reddit community that Sarah Palin tried to ban books and to encourage them to spread the word to other voters. This political motive is intended to rally the liberal Reddit community into spreading this negative information about Palin via other outlets. This more person-to-person scale action can further rally the base but also has more potential for swaying undecideds. People who already support Palin are likely to ignore the post completely, especially since it does not provide citation for its claim. Additionally, social status might act as a non-political motivating factor for meloveyoulongtime similar to that described for email – Reddit users each have a 'karma' score that goes up when other people vote up their posts, but while this might confer social status or make people happy, it doesn't have any tangible function.

It is particularly interesting that meloveyoulongtime did not use his headline to provide a link to appropriate documentation of his claim, and this criticism came up in many of the hundreds of comments on the post. Other Reddit users criticize meloveyoulongtime on his failure to provide documentation, and chez17 comments, "Why not link to the list for the actual post? Seems like it would make sense. Why the self post here?" Many different users actually sought to correct meloveyoulongtime's lack of citation in a several threaded exchanges, with users such as dnm, bonked, and B_FH linking outside sources (with the latter explicitly requesting Reddit karma for his effort). In actuality, the headline is untrue – although Palin did inquire to the librarian about the process for banning books, she did not necessarily react negatively to the librarian's refusal, and no list of books was ever given.[7]

Another interesting phenomenon that is apparent in the comments is that the single act of voting up the post comes to signify a huge variety of opinions. The user middkidd says, "Vote up if you think she should be laughed out of the political arena for suggesting that we should ban books in America," the user AlekseyP says, "Vote up if you think the OP should provide us with a list of books that Palin tried to ban," BannerBearer says, "vote up if you know we beat the nazis to keep books from being burned," and starman68916 says, "Vote up if you think puppies are cute." Other users, such as alanbrunsdon, are simply opposed to voting a post up as an expression of opinion, "I click the down arrow and then I click on the username of the "vote up if" poster and click the down arrow on every one of his submissions regardless of how interesting they are." The community has attached a variety of meanings to the predefined options of the vote up and vote down arrows, and individuals write comments to explain their own

personal votes. As a consequence, a popular Reddit post is not necessarily only one which a large number of users find interesting, but also one to which a large number of users can attach a positive meaning.

Similarly, a successful Twitter meme is one that a large number of people can relate their own interests to and repurpose in their own tweets. Twitter.com allows users to post 140 character status updates and to follow the updates of others. Although each tweet is technically a single piece of media, some groups of tweets lose much of their meaning without the broader memetic context, and thus multiple tweets among networked users can be considered a single multi-user collaboration.

Early on August 29th, 2008 McCain announced Palin as his vice-presidential nominee, and by 10:06am Twitter user MichaelTurk had written, "Little known fact: Sarah Palin used to wrestle kodiak bears in Alaskan bare knuckles fight clubs."[8] Two of his followers on Twitter responded later that day, writing tweets such as "Little known fact: Palin once won the Iditarod without any dogs. She simply willed the sled to victory."[9] These were the beginning of a Twitter meme of many thousands of tweets that still continued after five weeks.[*] The meme followed this general concept and often

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Several searches were necessary to determine with reasonable certainty the source of the LKF:SP meme. Twitter limits advanced searches on search.twiter.com to 1500 results with the most recent results returned first and other matching results are not returned. A search for the terms "little known fact palin" since before August 29th returns very nearly the maximum number of results, but MichaelTurk's tweet can be seen at the end. It is possible, however, that the meme did not initially include the "little known fact" phrase, so additional searches were done to determine if the meme had a previous form. No meme-like posts were found for "sarah palin" through August 28th, but the number of results from only August 29th exceeded the maximum. MichaelTurk links to a blog in his Twitter profile, and this blog has a post at

referenced pop culture, such as in DarkAdapted's tweet, "Little known fact: Chuck Norris backs down from no man. He does back down from Sarah Palin."[10] The LKF:SP tweets almost always criticize McCain's choice of Palin as a running mate through comedic absurdity and implicit sarcastic political commentary.

The distribution of text-based messages over Twitter differs in crucial ways from distribution over email. First, the users do not choose to whom each individual tweet is sent, but rather tweets are sent to all of the people who are following the sender's updates. Recipients cannot reply to all of the original user's followers, and instead they can only respond to their own followers. Thus twitter creates an overlapping group of relatively small local broadcast networks, but the one way communication paths that define these networks, as well as the restricted message length and the desire not to spam the uninterested, discourage active discussion on specific topics.

Users often follow their followers (creating a symmetric relationship), and thus if someone wants to retweet a tweet it is socially customary to give the original author credit (since he will likely see the retweet) by writing "Retweeting @authorname: [insert tweet here]." This differs from the practice of forwarding an email, when the original sender is often not included in the new list of recipients. In the context of the LKF:SP meme, active contribution to the meme with a new and creative tweet becomes an essential requirement for spreading it. Users cannot distribute content with the relative passivity with which they could forward an email or vote on a Reddit post – the medium

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http://www.kungfuquip.com/sarah-palin-facts/ about the Twitter meme that links to another website, http://www.palinfacts.com/. This website asserts MichaelTurk as the originator of the meme (see lower left bar), and thus it seems unlikely that someone else was the true originator between the end of August 28th and 10:06am the next day (which was probably very shortly after the announcement).

requires that users repackage the essential message in their own personal and social terms as a prerequisite for self-expression.

The myriad of users who involved themselves to the LKF:SP meme had, like in the other mediums, both political and social motivations for contributing. The tweets were generally intended to humorously mock Sarah Palin and rally the base of liberal voters, but undecided and conservative voters are unlikely to be at all swayed by such superficial commentary. Social status was a more significant motivating factor, and users can increase the esteem that their followers have for them by posting humorous tweets. For the Twitter user, the LKF:SP meme dynamically defines a unique environment for political expression and discourse that is both dependent on and affects the contributions of other users, but this same expression and discourse is limited by the constraints and the contexts of the medium.

As seen in the examples above, the specific channel in which a piece of text media is distributed informs its intent, content, and opportunities for discussion. In the email claiming that Biden will be replaced by Clinton as Obama's running mate, the anonymity of the original author and the ease of forwarding and discussion lead them to an ambiguous yet subtly partisan message. In the Reddit post on Palin and book banning, the lack of solid content or outside reference both fuels the message's distribution and damages it's credibility. Finally, the importance of creativity and humor to the spread of a Twitter meme restricts the expressive and conversational possibilities of LKF:SP. Although text itself might be nothing but simple characters in the absence of context, the nature of the tools used for its distribution and the context in which that distribution occurs can substantially affect the composition and efficacy of the message.

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