CHANGE AND MORE OF THE SAME: NEW MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES IN PRESIDENT OBAMA’S FIRST 100 DAYS

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Abstract

Developments in communications technology offer presidents new opportunities for winning public support for themselves and their policies. President Obama became the first president in the internet era to integrate blogs and weekly web addresses into his regular communications strategy, developing a new media communications team. But did the new communications forms translate into new strategies or did they simply serve as additional venues for spreading traditional messages? In this article, we examine President Obama’s media strategy during his First 100 Days. This is typically a time of capitalizing on popularity to accomplish goals as well as reaching out to a broader audience than just those who voted the president into office. We examine the content of White House blog entries and weekly web addresses posted during this time and identify three major communications strategies and themes contained within them: building unity, recasting ideological principles and debates, and contextualizing expectations. We then compare these to themes raised in two more traditional forms of presidential communication also employed during Obama’s First 100 Days: radio addresses and press briefings. We find that not only are the same themes prevalent in both new media and traditional forms of communication, they also largely reflect conventional goals and communication themes of previous presidents. The methods of spreading messages changed but the main strategies within them remained largely the same. Time will tell whether this pioneering in communications use will later translate into the development of new strategies for presidential success.

Presidential speech is like no other speech. What a president says today can become law tomorrow. A presidential malapropism can send the stock markets tumbling, and a presidential bon mot can give his people great joy. But no president speaks alone: his institution precedes him and it constrains him. (Hart 2002)

Woodrow Wilson, writing as an academic rather than as president, identified the potential power of presidents to lead through their words (Wilson 1908). He did so before the heyday of radio, the golden age of television, or the dawning of the internet opened up America’s living rooms and offices to the president in unprecedented fashion. Each development in communications technology offers presidents new opportunities for winning public support for themselves and their policies. However, while new methods for spreading messages can make existing communications strategies easier or facilitate the development of new ones (Kernell 2007), they do not guarantee the emergence of new strategies.

Developments in internet-based communication offer promise in helping presidents achieve their goals. In this article, we examine President Obama’s new media strategy during his First 100 Days and compare it to that used in traditional forms of communication. This period is typically a time of capitalizing on popularity to accomplish goals (see, e.g., Light 1983) as well as reaching out to a broader audience than just those who voted the president into office. We begin by outlining the role of communications strategy during this period in broad strokes. We then give a brief history of innovation in presidential communication. Next, we discuss some of the challenges of transitioning from campaigning to governing and how this should impact communications strategies in President Obama’s First 100 Days. We then examine the content of his weekly web addresses and White House blog entries posted during this time and identify three major communications strategies and themes contained within
them: building unity, recasting ideological principles and debates, and contextualizing expectations. We
discuss how these fit with the communication strategies of previous presidents and present data on the
frequency of use of these strategies during President Obama’s First 100 Days as a whole and over time.
We then compare these to the themes he and his administration raised in two traditional forms of
communication: radio addresses and press briefings. We conclude by discussing the challenges
presidents face when employing new communications technologies and their limited prospects for
success.

The Role of Communications Strategy

The Constitution awards the president the responsibility to recommend laws. Successful policy
proposals require that presidents take into account the current political environment. They typically
depend on the cooperation of a large group of people, both inside and outside of government. Strategic
communication can be used to sway potentially cooperating political actors and more crucially those that
can hold these political actors electorally accountable (Kernell 2007). Thus, Presidents working within
the legislative process to achieve policy goals develop a need for specific, targeted strategies to be
employed through multiple communications outlets. These strategies must adapt to changing conditions
such as the electoral cycle, the balance of power in the House and Senate, and the ever-evolving role of
the media.

As presidents seek to transition from campaigning to governing, they must seek to frame proposed
policies in ways likely to build supportive coalitions. This requires presidents to take into account the
diversity in the ideological affiliations of the public in determining how they communicate their policy
goals (Smith and Smith 1994). The frames presidents employ can influence how citizens view policies
(Nelson 2004; Wood 2004). The public’s perceptions of political issues and debates may change as
presidents re-contextualize issues and introduce new issues and ideas into the political discourse
(Zarefsky 2004). Presidents seek to characterize the debate in their favor and communicate the viability of
a proposed solution, informing constituents about the benefits of taking a potential course of action. This
requires building a communications strategy that can effectively broadcast the advantages of a given
policy to all the appropriate constituent groups. Effective strategists must understand where
individuals receive information and then cultivate strategies for reaching them there. This not only necessitates that
formal, accepted forms of disseminating information are used, but that new forms are utilized as they are
created.

A Brief History of Presidential Communication

Nineteenth century presidents had little ability to communicate directly with American citizens. Only
citizens within earshot could hear their public speeches. The presidents’ messages spread via newspapers
that reprinted their remarks, but the gap between delivery and printing could stretch for several months.
This limited the presidents’ ability to address the nation about pressing public policy issues and instead
encouraged discussion of subjects with less time-bound appeal. The rise of commercial radio stations in
the 1920s offered presidents a way to communicate to a broader segment of the American public and do
so far more quickly. However, it took a while for presidents to take full advantage of this opportunity.
While Harding offered a few speeches over the radio waves, Coolidge was the first to bring a State of the
Union address to the nation’s living rooms via radio. “Silent Cal” found his voice on the radio and he
followed up with other radio addresses directed specifically to the public, sometimes reaching an
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audience of millions (Cornwall 1957). However, it failed to recognize radio as a mechanism for
advancing his policy goals. Instead, “His public statements were for the most part homilies on American
history, the American way of life, the moral virtues, and the like, with only remote relevance to specific
policy proposals” (Cornwall 1957). In this respect, his rhetoric resembled that of many pre-radio
presidents. FDR, instead, was the first to make radio an integral part of his communications strategy,
leveraging radio to calm a worried public with his fireside chats. In addition, FDR made over 300 radio
addresses during his presidency. Fireside chats were reserved for serious problems facing the country
while the more frequent radio addresses tended to focus “on softer and more personal themes: faith,
peace, children, and community” (Lim 2003). Lim’s (2003) content analysis suggests that FDR’s radio strategy still mirrored that of traditional presidential communications.

FDR’s Fireside Chats, even though they were broadcast on radio and subject to the alleged imperatives of the medium, nevertheless held on to the fiery elements of platform rhetoric. That is to say, contrary to conventional wisdom, the medium did not become the message. Even as a demi-Atlas among presidents. Franklin Roosevelt was, like all great men, a product of his times. As it turns out, FDR did not inaugurate a new era of "modern" presidential rhetoric with his Fireside Chats; rather, the chats instantiate yet another stage in the evolution of presidential oratory.

This regular feature of FDR’s presidency was employed far less by Truman and fell to the wayside in subsequent administrations until Reagan revived it in the early years of his presidency (Rowland and Jones 2002). Reagan used these to characterize conservative principles in terms meant to appeal to a broader audience and emphasized themes of inclusiveness and unity (Rowland and Jones 2002).

Meanwhile, television opened the doors to America’s living rooms even further. For the first time, Americans were able to not only hear a president’s speech but to see its delivery. President Truman became the first to give a televised address from the White House (it was also broadcast via radio due to the relatively small number of American households with television sets at the time) – an appeal for conservation of food (Truman 1947). President Eisenhower hired a television consultant, created a television studio in the White House and employed it for his own form of “fireside chats” (Allen 1993). By 1960, nearly 90% of American households had a television and it was a central form of presidential communication. In these early days of television, presidents could give a televised speech and expect it to be shown on every major channel. This offered presidents a platform for opinion leadership. Presidents in the television era have used televised addresses to “go public” and win the public and, therefore, Congress to their sides in policy debates (Kernell 2007).

However, televised public appeals only work under certain circumstances and sometimes appeals fall “on deaf ears” (Edwards 2003). By the early 1990s, the rise of cable and satellite television greatly complicated presidents’ ability to reach large segments of the public (Baum and Kernell 1999). When given other programming choices, more and more Americans began to reach for their remotes. Whether someone watched the speech or changed the channel became strongly associated with whether or not one approved of the president (Kernell and Rice 2011). This made opinion leadership of the public more difficult.

Not long after the “golden age” of television ended, the emergence of the internet began to offer a new venue for presidents to reach the public. Bill Clinton began use of the internet while he was still just a presidential candidate in 1992. The text-only site contained basic information about the candidate although most Americans lacked the internet connectivity needed to access it (Bimber and Davis 2003). The first White House web site was unveiled on President Clinton’s Inauguration Day in 1993 although technically it was a part of Gopher, not the World Wide Web. The White House then officially launched www.whitehouse.gov on October 21, 1993 (Owen and Davis 2008). The White House website underwent several upgrades during the Clinton presidency including the ability to “e-mail the president” although the president did not use e-mail himself and there were reports of stacks of printed out e-mails awaiting responses by Clinton’s internet team (Owen and Davis 2008). President Clinton also issued an executive order in 1996 calling for executive branch agencies to develop an online presence in order to make government more accessible and transparent. The White House website, as well as those of various executive branch agencies, became repositories of a variety of government documents. The internet was used as a vehicle for transparency and a source of information rather than a potential vehicle for persuasion or coalition building. There was little content created specifically for online communication.

Although the internet team of President George W. Bush had a troubled start in 2001 with the new administration’s website mistakenly still containing “Insert Something Meaningful Here” underneath news of Bush’s inauguration (McCullagh 2001), over time they incorporated a number of newly
developing forms of internet communication into the president’s communication strategy. Innovations in presidential communication during Bush’s two terms in office included rapid-response e-mails, an “Ask the White House” forum and live chats with executive branch officials, the “Barney Cam,” and other use of video such as archives of press conferences and signing ceremonies. Still, the emphasis remained on transparency and making traditional sources of presidential communication available to an online audience. By the end of his presidency the site received several million visitors per month. President George W. Bush also became the first president to make podcasts of his radio address available on iTunes and the first president to “tweet” by making updates about the president’s daily activities available on Twitter (Owen and Davis 2008). Still, complaints continued about presidents lagging far behind both available internet technology and the use of it in campaigns. These complaints centered on the lack of use of the interactivity offered by web 2.0 applications. Part of this lag may relate to expectations about the presidential role, a topic we return to in our conclusion.

New Media Use and the Transition from Campaigning to Governing

During the 2008 presidential election campaign, then candidate and Senator Obama sought to use all the possible resources available to communicate his mantra of “Change” to a wide audience. Both conventional and non-conventional forms of media became essential to Obama’s election campaign. To reach and energize younger audiences the Obama campaign sought to modernize campaigning and embrace the innovative and underexplored areas of new media by embracing web 2.0 applications such as Facebook and Twitter and blogging regularly.¹

Some of these tools became a regular part of his early presidency. In his First 100 Days, President Obama became the first president to use a BlackBerry (Zeleny 2009). This provided fodder for much pundit chatter as he assumed office. He also became the first president in the internet era to integrate blogs and weekly web addresses into his regular communications strategy. More than previous administrations’ online attempts, these offered the potential to include strategic content generated specifically for the web.

The New Media Team

President Obama quickly moved to integrate use of the internet into his communications strategy through appointing Macon Phillips as the Whitehouse Director of New Media. (‘The Briefing Room’ Jan 20).² This position oversees ‘The Blog,’ ‘Your Weekly Address’ and other affiliated Whitehouse websites. Phillips outlined three goals for developing a greater online presence in one of the first posts to “The Blog”: communication, transparency, and participation. Like the two prior administrations, the new media team would provide access to executive orders and other public documents to keep citizens “up-to-date and educated” (‘The Blog’ Jan 20) and to insure greater openness in government. The third goal, participation, marks the largest departure from prior presidential practice on the internet. The new media team sought to increase the online activity of citizens and open channels for them to influence government. For example, the White House website solicited online feedback concerning legislation. This had the potential to be used strategically to woo the support of website visitors and mobilize them towards action.

Much of the early online efforts were focused on the development of “The Blog” and the Weekly Web Addresses. In the First One Hundred Days, “The Blog” was used to consolidate large bodies of information and highlight the specific tactical messages the administration sought to communicate. It consisted largely of informational announcements concerning legislation, appointments and government related events. However, non-political features of the presidency were also presented in various posts. Over the course of the First 100 Days, “The Blog” began to develop from a primarily text based tool into a fully visual connection to the life and operations of the White House. Meanwhile, the weekly web

¹ Pundit Ariana Huffington proclaimed that “Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president” at the Web 2.0 Summit (Miller 2008).
² Phillips was the former Deputy Director of New Media in President Obama’s campaign organization, Obama for America.
address allowed site visitors to view a new, brief message from the president each week. This gave the
president a new forum to reach out to the public and appeal for their support. But did these new
communications forms translate into new strategies or did they simply serve as additional venues for
spreading traditional messages and strategies? In the remainder of the article, we examine the
communications strategies contained within both the weekly web addresses and blog posts and compare
them to those used in traditional forms of communication and to those employed by prior presidents.

New Media Communications Strategies in Obama’s First 100 Days

While methods of communicating messages are changing and expanding, many pressures and
expectations of the presidency remain the same. In the First 100 Days, presidents must attempt to
successfully make the transition from campaigning to governing. In the modern era, the two sometimes
blur together but this is not necessarily considered a positive development. Edwards (2003) goes so far as
to say that "the permanent campaign is antithetical to governing." During this period, presidents must
attempt to live up to the expectations generated by their campaign while transitioning into the role of
president of all citizens of the United States. They must unite a divided electorate into unified Americans.
Research suggests that presidents’ best shot at this occurs during the honeymoon period when their
approval rating is high (Wood 2009).3 They must also begin to focus on achieving realistic goals.
President Obama’s transition team explicitly acknowledged and addressed “the need to move from a more
expansive list of campaign promises to a leaner presidential agenda” (Burke 2009 p. 577).

Like President George W. Bush’s team before them (Kumar 2003), the Obama transition team studied
past presidential transitions for lessons of what worked and what failed. Realizing that executive branch
vacancies make carrying out the president’s agenda more difficult, the Obama team placed a high
premium on filling positions in both the cabinet and the White House Office quickly. The positions of
communication director and press secretary were filled well before inauguration (Burke 2009) giving
ample time to develop communications and media strategy for the First 100 Days. The White House
Office of Communications typically plays a key role in development of communications strategy meant to
help achieve policy goals (Kumar 2001). Among their tasks, they help frame issues in ways that build
support for policies.

The Obama team began building support even before assuming office. According to Burke (2009 p.
587), the transition period was acknowledged by the Obama team as “a time to broaden public support
and build links to groups that were a part of the campaign effort and which would likely be important in
the administration’s early policy efforts.” Such efforts typically continue into presidents’ First 100 Days.
In fact, conventional wisdom states that prospects for success are highest during this honeymoon period
and that skilled presidents can marshal their early popularity into policy success (see, e.g. Light 1983).

Data and Methods

While the Obama White House employed several new communications forms, that does not
guarantee the strategies contained within them changed remarkably from prior presidents’ strategies. To
determine the dominant communications strategies used in these forms, we carefully examined the
weekly web addresses (“Your Weekly Address”) and blog posts (“The Blog”) for Obama’s First 100
Days in Office, watching and reading for common themes. We initially identified seven types of
statements or themes that occurred most commonly and then collapsed four of these – bipartisanship,
patriotism, building domestic support for international diplomacy, and international cooperation and
support – into one central theme of unity as the strategy of building unity happened on multiple levels:
unity across political party, shared identity as Americans, and greater understanding of and identification
with the international community. Thus, three dominant strategy themes emerged from this initial
investigation: building unity, redefining ideological principles and debates, and contextualizing issues.

3 During later periods, lacking strong public or institutional support, the president may instead be best served by engaging in
partisan rhetoric (Wood 2009). However, Wood and Lee’s (2009) examination of presidential rhetoric during the television era
finds that presidents pragmatically moderate their rhetoric when facing divided government.
Once we had identified the most dominant communications strategies and themes, we went back through the web addresses and blogs several times in an effort to insure no relevant statements were missed or miscoded in our content analysis. This procedure involved repeatedly viewing fourteen web addresses and carefully reading 279 blog posts. We both reviewed any cases of uncertainty or disagreement and made final decisions on these cases together. Figures 1 and 2 display the distributions of strategy types across each format. Below we discuss the parameters of each of these themes and our findings regarding each of them in greater detail.

**Fig. 1: Overall Strategy Use in Weekly Web Addresses during President Obama’s First 100 Days**

![Bar chart showing overall strategy use in weekly web addresses.]

**Fig. 2: Overall Strategy Use in “The Blog” during President Obama’s First 100 Days**

![Bar chart showing overall strategy use in blogs.]

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Building Unity

President Obama’s communications strategy differed from his predecessor who displayed a penchant for what Coe et al. (2004) label binary discourse. This strategy paints the world in polar opposites such as good and evil or security and peril and was used heavily by President George W. Bush after the September 11 terrorist attacks. This strategy both unites and divides. The world is divided into “us” and “them,” uniting “us” in opposition to a threat, perceived or real. Coe et al. (2004) suggest that this strategy is particularly likely to be parroted by the media because it feeds the media’s need for conflict, good sound bites, and coverage that resonates with American values. While this strategy was successful at times in uniting the American people, it created division among the international community. Instead, Obama favored another common strategy – building unity by focusing on common ground – and attempted to do so on both a national and international level. The overarching narrative of a unified people was a key theme in President-elect Obama’s election night victory speech and was a key theme of the First 100 Days of President Obama’s administration. The strategy of building unity through words has been utilized in an effort to achieve both domestic and foreign policy goals and is a common communications strategy in the transition from candidates to presidents. Successfully achieving a sense of unity can bring together a divided electorate and make policy debates much less inflammatory and less likely to end unsuccessfully. President Obama emphasized four main components within this strategy of building unity in the web addresses and blogs during his First 100 Days: domestic bipartisanship, American patriotism, building domestic support for international diplomacy, and international cooperation and support.

Bipartisanship

The pursuit of political bipartisanship has been a goal of numerous political figures in American history. The appearance of bipartisanship can cultivate a perception of being more productive and lead to more broad-based approval. If a political figure instead becomes consistently characterized as polarizing, many constituents may assume the figure is disruptive to the debate. For example, George W. Bush earned the reputation of a particularly partisan and polarizing president. However, content analysis of presidential communications during his first term revealed that use of bipartisan rhetoric far outweighed partisan appeals (Coleman and Manna 2007). While Bush employed a bipartisan, unifying rhetorical strategy far more than a partisan one, it largely failed.

Bipartisanship, as a rhetorical tool, is dependent upon certain political conditions to be a viable method for achieving agenda goals. Successful use of bipartisan appeals can be a key to success in divided government. Bipartisanship rhetoric seeks to woo the cooperation of legislators across the aisle. Bipartisanship in practice frequently involves pragmatic ideological compromise and political bargaining. With a secure majority of two-hundred fifty-six Democrats in the House of Representatives and fifty-eight Democrats in the Senate, it would seem President Obama might have had little need for this strategy. However the large numbers of Democrats in each chamber masks ideological differences within the party. In 2006, a fairly large number of conservative Democrats were voted into office who would not be guaranteed supporters of liberal policies. Especially in the Senate, where a single defection might mean an inability to block a filibuster, reaching out to moderate Republicans through bipartisan rhetoric could help insure needed support. In addition, Obama had campaigned on “change” that would include ending the heavily partisan environment of the Bush administration. Pressure for bipartisanship was exhibited in the early press briefings included in the blog. The following statement by President Obama after a meeting with Congressional Republicans was included on January 27, 2009.

I don't expect a hundred percent agreement from my Republican colleagues, but I do hope that we can all put politics aside and do the American people's business right now. (Phillips 2009a)

4 There were also two independents that caucused with Democrats.
The statement implies that bipartisanship will involve concessions and urges Congress to place the interests of the nation above their political futures. This theme was also captured in President Obama’s first weekly address when he requested that those in the political debate “act as citizens, not partisans” (Phillips 2009b). This basic sentiment was repeated throughout Obama’s First 100 Days. For example, when working on getting his first budget through Congress, he reminded congressional leaders that:

The American people sent us here to get things done. And in this moment of enormous challenge, they are watching and waiting for us to lead. Let's show them that we're equal to this task before us. Let's pass a budget that puts this nation on the road to lasting prosperity. (Lee 2009a)

These remarks were reposted on the White House Blog. The administration’s intended message to both political actors and their constituents: it is better to compromise and cooperate than remain stagnant because of the political price and the practical effect on the nation. Bipartisanship was a consistent component of the strategy during the first one-hundred days.

Visual aspects of ‘The Blog’ also advanced the strategic goal of unity. Exhibiting visual representations of family life and holiday celebrations connects American citizens’ lives together and displays activities that constituents may share with the first family. Equally, scientific accomplishments and other non-political successes that can be shared as a nation are made available in ‘The Blog,’ as can be seen in posts such as “A beautiful, beautiful launch” about the Space Shuttle Discovery (Lee 2009b). While these topics were portrayed in a new format, they resembled the noncontroversial themes prevalent in the regular radio addresses of Coolidge (Cornwall 1957) and FDR (Lim 2003).

Patriotism

American patriotism was another component of Obama’s communication strategy to build a sense of unity. This strategy dates back to some of the nation’s earliest presidents (Tulis 1987). When a political figure can inspire citizens to be patriotic they relate that patriotic feeling to a shared commonality between their own beliefs and that of the president. Presidents help to define what it means to be American and give the nation a unifying purpose (Roelofs 1992). Presidents who use this strategy may hope to translate that support for the country into support for their political policies. In the web addresses and blogs during the First 100 Days, President Obama communicated the value of patriotism and how that binds Americans together. Appreciation for our armed forces despite vocal opposition to the Iraq War forms a part of this unifying call of patriotism. In his inauguration address President Obama stated:

As we consider the role that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who at this very hour patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains. They have something to tell us, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages. (Obama 2009a).

This held vague echoes of Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, using past and present sacrifice to help define the nation’s future course, a method favored in the prophetic president model of rhetorical leadership (Roelofs 1992). The address focused on shared values and love of country. Other messages over the course of the First 100 Days discuss patriotism and love of country more explicitly. Relating the commonalities between Americans of all ideologies downplays their disparities. On February 24, 2009, the Whitehouse blog posted selected remarks from President Obama’s address before Congress.

I know that we haven’t agreed on every issue thus far, and there are surely times in the future when we will part ways. But I also know that every American who is sitting here tonight loves this country and wants it to succeed. That must be the starting point for every debate we have in

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5 It also places failure to cooperate in a bipartisan manner on the Republicans’ shoulders.
the coming months, and where we return after those debates are done. That is the foundation on which the American people expect us to build common ground. (Phillips 2009c)

This demonstrates the useful nature of transitioning from a unifying patriotic theme into seeking pragmatic political results. Patriotism can play an important role in building “common ground” on a multitude of domestic issues. A similar approach of inclusiveness and unity as Americans was used by President Reagan in his radio addresses (Rowland and Jones 2002). This also follows a trend of what Lim (2002) labels “a certain democratic chattiness: a rhetoric that honors the people (and their visionary leader), is compassionate, inclusive, and egalitarian” (p. 338).

**Building Domestic Support for International Diplomacy**

This strategy of inclusiveness also extended to the foreign policy arena. A successful foreign policy often begins with formulating domestic support for it by building an effective narrative. In the April 4th Weekly Address President Obama stated the following before attending the G-20 summit:

> The challenges of our time threaten the peace and prosperity of every single nation, and no one nation can meet them alone. That is why it is sometimes necessary for a President to travel abroad in order to protect and strengthen our nation here at home. That is what I have done this week. (Lee 2009c)

This statement was intended to display the importance of diplomacy and international interaction to a public prone to bouts of isolationism.

**International Cooperation and Support**

President Obama promised to usher in a new era of international cooperation. His rhetoric in the new media formats was easily accessible not just to U.S. citizens but to international leaders, scholars, and citizens alike. America’s central economic, diplomatic, and military role in the international community, and its loss in international support during the Bush administration, created a need to promote America and the favorability of American foreign policy both domestically and abroad. To combat negative perceptions the administration highlighted online President Obama’s attempts to reach out to the world community. On January 27th President Obama made the following remarks to Muslim television station Al Arabiya and they were repeated in the White House blog:

> My job is to communicate to the American people that the Muslim world is filled with extraordinary people who simply want to live their lives and see their children live better lives… (Phillips 2009d)

This remark also demonstrates what Shogan (2009) identified as the central role of empathy in Obama’s governing principles and rhetorical style. President Obama emphasizes commonalities between American life and that of the “Muslim world” to promote a more positive view of America by citizens of Arab nations and to increase international cooperation between America and Middle-Eastern nations. Improving the perception of America in the international community helped insure President Obama could meet international crises as an influential and respected leader. The strategy could also be used to boost American morale. Together, these elements were aimed at helping to build unity among the American public.

Our content analysis concluded that a total of 34 unifying statements were made in the fourteen weekly web addresses, averaging 2.4 unifying statements per address. In addition, statements meant to build unity were included 223 times across 279 blogs.

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6 The early promise he showed in achieving this contributed to being awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.
Re-Characterizing Ideological Principles and Debates

While unity was a common theme, it was eclipsed by another thematic strategy: redefining ideological principles and debates. This involves framing policies in an advantageous manner to the president through re-characterizing ideological principles and debates. Here, the president speaks in the language of those he hopes to persuade. The presidency has a uniquely broad electorate to appeal to and this makes how policies are framed crucial. According to Nelson (2004), “Successful frames must consider the target audience’s existing values and emphasize the special importance of a particular value for a given issue, rather than infuse the audience with an entirely new value structure” (p. 584). President Obama ran on two primary campaign messages: “hope” and “change.” While the theme of change resonated strongly with an electorate largely dissatisfied with the status quo, support for specific changes was less widespread. Thus, Smith and Smith’s (1994) advice to President Clinton at the end of his First 100 Days in office in order to successfully bring about policy change holds relevance for Obama throughout his: he must frame change “to demonstrate that there is nothing as traditional as change” (p. 245).

In its First 100 Days, the Obama administration referenced both conservative and progressive ideological principles, to re-frame policies and build support among target audiences. This strategy bears some resemblance to one used by President Ronald Reagan. Although the two may be placed near opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, both made use of the language of the other ideological camp to reach out to detractors and appear not as ideologues but as sensible moderates. In Rowland and Jones’ (2002) content analysis of Reagan’s weekly radio addresses, they found that Reagan “took conservative principles and tried to make them as widely applicable as possible” (p. 101). He “defended his approach as reforming government rather than as opposition to government” (p. 89) and “reinforced basic values and drew on those values to redefine how people should look at his administration” (p. 99).

To rally support for economic reforms, the Obama administration frequently stressed the fiscally conservative aspects of the policies. In a statement made by President Obama after meeting with Congressional Republicans on January 27, 2009 made available on the blog, Obama said:

> The American people expect action. They want us to put together a recovery package that puts people back to work, that creates investments that assure our long-term energy independence, an effective health care system, an education system that works; they want our infrastructure rebuilt, and they want it done wisely, so that we're not wasting taxpayer money. (Phillips 2009a)

The central goal in this strategy involves redefining how the national electorate relates fiscally responsible policy to progressive economic policy. It appeals to conservatives and moderates who are concerned about the size and scope of government as well as its spending. Other blog posts and web addresses call for tax cuts and fiscal discipline, both popular terms with conservatives. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs press conference remarks on January 28, 2009 that argued on behalf of the administration’s views on the stimulus package were reposted on the White House blog:

> We think if members focus on this bill they'll see that it moves the economy forward; that money will be spent in this economy, 75 percent of it in the first 18 months; that jobs will be created, money will get put back into people's pockets. This, along with a financial stability package, reregulation, and a plan to deal with home foreclosures, will push this economy forward and put people back to work. (Phillips 2009e)

Here, there is emphasis on the strengths of liberal or progressive policies to deal with pressing economic concerns. The emphasis on pragmatism appeals to Americans’ self-interest and is cast in terms meant to broaden appeal to conservatives and moderates.

Foley (2008) argued that liberalism retained enough negative connotations that “liberals are still confronted by the need to nuance their appeals within a largely conservative framework of political caution, social skepticism and governmental distrust.” Presidents, including FDR and Reagan have
successfully redefined liberalism in the past (Zarefsky 2004). These redefinitions typically occur in times of economic turmoil. The arguments for the economic agenda of the Obama administration during the First 100 Days were highly defined by their attempt to bridge the ideological chasm between liberal and conservative. According to Smith and Smith’s (1994) model of presidential rhetoric, “It is frequently necessary for presidents to speak in the language of their domestic adversaries to bridge the gulf between them” (p. 131). The Obama administration developed their media strategy to reach out to Republican voters in the same language that Republican political figures used in an attempt to build a broader level of support for his policy goals.

Our content analysis suggests this was by far the most commonly used strategy in the web addresses. We identified 51 uses of this strategy across the fourteen addresses, averaging 3.6 uses per address. It was also used 286 separate times across the 279 blog entries.

**Contextualization**

The final main strategic theme we identified in the Obama administration’s new media communications involves contextualizing the issues facing the nation. As the focal point of national politics, presidents can give definition to situations that shape the context through which citizens evaluate their performance (Zarefsky 2004; Druckman and Holmes 2004). This strategy to manage context and therefore expectations was first unveiled in Obama’s election night speech and then again in his inaugural address (Burke 2009). As he has frequently reiterated, President Obama had inherited two ongoing foreign wars and an economic recession. Maintaining public support required building distance from the cause of these issues and placing responsibility on the Bush Administration. This strategy also involved downplaying the expectations of immediate results in both foreign and domestic policy, especially economic policy. In a February 24th blog post of an address to congress that day, President Obama made the following remarks:

> My budget does not attempt to solve every problem or address every issue. It reflects the stark reality of what we’ve inherited – a trillion dollar deficit, a financial crisis, and a costly recession. Given these realities, everyone in this chamber – Democrats and Republicans – will have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars. And that includes me. (Phillips 2009c)

Here, President Obama attempted to highlight the separation between the current administration and the former one while appealing for bipartisanship. This resembles the strategy of Reagan to blame the Carter administration and its policies for the nation’s economy (Wood 2004). Creating contrast between the two administrations’ policies was meant to maintain the support of the public in the face of economic conditions that would normally lead to a quick drop in public opinion. Presidents frequently mix this with statements of optimism about the future of the economy (Wood 2004). Similarly, President Obama made the following remarks at Treasury Secretary Timothy Geitner’s swearing in ceremony on January 26, 2009 that were posted on the blog on January 27th:

> [The Economy] has been badly weakened by an era of irresponsibility; a series of imprudent and dangerous decisions on Wall Street; and an unrelenting quest for profit with too little regard for risk, too little regulatory scrutiny, and too little accountability. The result has been a devastating loss of trust and confidence in our economy, our financial markets, and our government. That era must end right now, and I believe it can. (Phillips 2009f)

The intention of this language was to rebuke the practices that led to the economic recession and offer hope by calling for new policies to address them.

The other tactic involved in contextualization involved lowering expectations for a given policy as well as of the administration as a whole. We identified rhetoric aimed at changing the basis on which the president was evaluated, making the public realize that change will take time, and making the eventual
benefits or potential failures seem less consequential. President Obama’s remarks from the March 7, 2009 weekly address exhibited this strategy.

From the day I took office, I knew that solving this crisis would not be easy, nor would it happen overnight. And we will continue to face difficult days in the months ahead. But I also believe that we will get through this – that if we act swiftly and boldly and responsibly, the United States of America will emerge stronger and more prosperous than it was before. (Djang 2009)

This statement begins by informing constituents about the potentially long time frame involved in economic recovery while ending with a reassurance that the economic recovery will be successful. It pushes for action while protecting the president from drops in popularity.

Our content analysis of weekly web addresses and The Blog during President Obama’s First 100 Days revealed that contextualization through blaming the prior administration and lowering expectations was the least used of the three strategies. It was employed just 19 times across the 14 web addresses, averaging 1.4 times per address. It also appeared 144 times in the 279 blog entries.

**Strategy Usage over Time**

In addition to the different levels in overall use of the three strategies, we also identified differences in their usage over time. Figure 3 displays the use of these strategies in the web addresses across Obama’s First 100 Days. As it shows, use of these strategies did not hold steady over time. Re-characterization of ideological principles was the most common in the majority of addresses, although it was occasionally surpassed by unifying statements. Both of these approaches were meant to broaden support for President Obama’s policies. Contextualizing statements were least common in all addresses and show a general decline in usage over time, with several weeks’ addresses completely lacking this strategy. Although contextualizing statements reappeared in the last two web addresses, as Obama began to see policy success and small signs of economic recovery, the need for placing blame and lowering expectations diminished.

**Fig. 3: Communications Strategy Use over Time during President Obama’s First 100 Days**
Corresponding Strategic Themes in New and Traditional Forms of Media

We have discussed in the previous sections how the strategic themes raised by President Obama via new media formats resemble those used by prior administrations in traditional media formats. The final component of our research involved a comparison of the Obama administration’s new media communications themes to those used in two more traditional forms of communication during his First 100 Days: weekly radio addresses and press briefings. Upon comparative analysis, we find that the strategic aims and themes prevalent in his use of new media are equally evident in the use of traditional media during this period.

Full Duplication: The Weekly Address

The most evident case of duplication we find between the strategic themes used in new media and traditional media involves the “Weekly Address.” On January 24, 2009, President Obama’s first post-inaugural “Weekly Address” was issued on both radio and online video (Obama 2009b). From that point on, the weekly radio address and the weekly web address contained identical content. The radio address was simply the audio version of the video weekly web address. We also discovered that this “Weekly Address” was routinely posted on the “Blog” as a secondary source for WhiteHouse.gov readers. This expansion of the radio address into both an online video address and the text of blog posts spread the same themes to a broader base of viewers and listeners.

Selective Duplication: Press Briefings and the Blog

A central justification for developing the “Blog” was to reach an audience who would directly access information from the White House instead of relying on conventional news media’s reporting of this information. Thus, the advent of direct access to citizens through new internet-based tools may augment the ability to execute strategy already in use among other varieties of media. To maximize the potency of strategic communication from Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, the “Blog” took excerpts directly from answers in the dialogue of “Press Briefings.” The use of duplication started January 26, 2009 by releasing select quotes from the second “Press Briefing.”

This afternoon, in his second press briefing, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs fielded questions on energy independence, the stimulus package, and the auto industry. Here are some selected responses from the press conference. (Phillips 2009g)

Duplication of specific sections of dialogues gives the White House the advantage to reproduce only the most successful responses from each release.

Strategic Themes in Press Briefings

Although the main purpose of our research is to identify the strategic communications themes employed in new media formats during President Obama’s First 100 Days, in order to compare these to that of traditional media, we performed a limited investigation of the strategic themes raised by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs in press briefings. To do so, we read the opening statements of the press briefings, looking for the themes of building unity, re-characterizing ideological principles and debates, and contextualizing of problems. We focused only on the opening statements because they represent the strategic themes the administration would like to release to the media. The remaining question and answer period of the “Press Briefings” are not direct communication which can be guided by the White House, but rather responses to a series of questions from media representatives. Due to this condition, the full “Press Briefings” are not good indicators of the intended focus of the Office of the Press Secretary in the Obama administration.

We found that all of the strategic themes most prevalent in the weekly addresses and blog also made regular appearances in the press briefings. Building unity was a defining theme of the early releases from

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7 We did not examine whether other themes were prevalent in the press briefings.
the administration. In fact, the first press briefing that was included in the blog includes explicit references to bipartisanship.

The President is very serious about this[bipartisanship]....[T]he job announcements today underscore the necessity that Washington not respond to the latest crisis simply by doing what Washington always does best and does more frequently, and that is get into too much of a back and forth and have important issues that the American people are concerned about become a political football. That's why the President is willing and eager to go first to have Republican leaders and Democratic leaders here... (Phillips 2009g)

This approach was intended to send a message to Congressional members as much as their constituents. This rhetoric allows President Obama to seem focused on overcoming partisan gridlock through unity. In another press briefing, Press Secretary Gibbs also characterizes Obama’s message in unifying rhetoric that draws on American identity and patriotism:

The President emphasized that Wall Street needs Main Street, and that Main Street needs Wall Street; that everybody has to pitch in; that we're all in this together (Gibbs 2009).

The press briefings also included aspects of building unity related to international diplomacy. On March 27, 2009, the same day Sec. Gibbs released a “Press Briefing” emphasizing patriotism, other representatives of the administration were pursuing complimentary strategic goals. State Department Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and Defense Department Under Secretary Michelle Flournoy as well as Security Expert Bruce Reideln held a press briefing related to the change of military strategy with regards to both Afghanistan and Pakistan (Flournoy et al. 2009).

Lastly, we're going to engage in very intensive regional diplomacy with all the key stakeholders in the region in order to make sure we do everything we can to enhance security and stability in the broader region and isolate al Qaeda and the militants as much as possible (Flournoy et al. 2009).

In this briefing the officials outlined the aggressive style with which the Obama administration will seek international diplomacy while giving the implication that seeking an alternative policy position will result in not seeking to “enhance security” to its greatest potential. This was intended to help build domestic support for international diplomacy.

We also found rhetoric focused on building unity through international cooperation and support. On February 19, 2009 Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg spoke in a “Press Briefing” to the media on a series of presidential meetings with international dignitaries (Gibbs and Steinberg 2009). In this release he referenced statements that the President had made regarding America's international standing and consideration of its major ally Canada.

He [President Obama] made a point out of saying, as he said in the press conference, that some – because we [U.S. and Canada] are so close that people sometimes take it for granted, and he really wanted to use the trip as a way to really reinforce the fact that he didn't take the relationship for granted, that he really valued the partnership (Gibbs and Steinberg 2009).

This is a prime example of the administration devoting time and effort toward international cooperation and support as part of the larger goal of the President to recast America's role in the world after the Bush Administration.

Press briefings were also used to help re-characterize ideological principles and debates. In a press conference held by President Obama February 9, 2009 he characterized the “Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan.”
It also contains an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability, so that every American will be able to go online and see where and how we're spending every dime. What it does not contain, however, is a single pet project, not a single earmark, and it has been stripped of the projects members of both parties found most objectionable. (Obama 2009c)

Despite being a spending measure, President Obama uses the language of fiscal conservatism to communicate the value of the bill. By masking a spending project in rhetoric which gives the impression of being fiscally prudent, the White House is able to gain greater popular support for the project in question.

Finally, contextualization also made its way into press briefings. The Obama administration invested time and effort into condemning the actions of the George W. Bush administration and blaming them for current domestic and international hardship. One place this strategy appeared was a press briefing with the Direction for the Office of Management and Budget Peter Orzag and Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers Christie Romer.

Well, let's be very clear. Again, I want to come back to where I started. We're inheriting a cumulative deficit over the next decade of $9 trillion. We have to start the process of working that down. This budget does that (Orzag and Romer 2009).

This is an example of an administration official making a statement which puts deficit spending in the context of an inherited problem. This builds context around the difficult decisions that have to be made when governing. By engaging in contextualization in both new and traditional communications formats, the Obama administration was attempting to mitigate electoral consequences and risk.

Frequency of Contextualization in the Full Press Briefings

We focused on themes in the opening statements of press briefings because these represent the messages the administration would like to release to the media. The question and answer period of press briefings allows reporters to determine the rest of the course in which a “Press Briefing” will go. However, that does not stop the press secretary or other administration officials from employing strategic themes in their responses. While a full human-coded content analysis of the entire press briefings was not feasible for the scope of this article, we were able to examine the use of contextualization in both the opening statements and question and answer periods of the Press Briefings through an electronic search of the transcripts for mentions of Bush. This method will not capture every instance of contextualization but it does provide one indicator of the frequency of this strategy.

Figure 4 tracks the amount of mentions of “Bush” inside the press releases from the inauguration to the end of April. We separate them into those made by administration officials and those made by reporters. It is evident through the progression of the First One Hundred Days that the Bush administration became less of a focus for the White House press team. The White House officials that held “Press Briefings” made fourteen mentions of Bush; nine of the fourteen, or nearly 65%, are made in January and February. Similarly, 12 of the 19 efforts at contextualization in the weekly addresses, just over 63%, occurred in these months.

Interestingly, the reporters that attended these press briefings were much more inclined to incorporate a discussion of the Bush administration into their questions than those representing the President. Though mentions of Bush by reporters routinely outpace those by administration officials, a similar trend in decline in mentions over time does appear. The press mentioned “Bush” fifty-nine times, the only events that reached four mentions in one setting occurred in February.
Implications and Conclusions

While new media offers presidents potential to strategically target internet users with messages developed specifically for gaining their support for policy proposals, Obama did not fully take advantage of this in his First 100 Days. The methods of spreading messages changed but the main strategic themes within them remained largely the same. The content in weekly web addresses duplicated more traditional weekly radio addresses. Similar strategies in the web addresses and the blog entries, which often merely repeated offline communications, cause us to conclude that Obama’s new media communications strategies were not very different than those aimed at traditional media. Our investigation of press briefings helps confirm that the same themes were employed in both traditional and new media forms of communication. Rather than a forum for the expression of ideas or a vehicle for specifically targeted attempts at persuasion, the Obama administration’s use of “The Blog” in the First 100 Days mirrors the Bush administration’s usage of Twitter: rehashing of the president’s schedule, activities, and repeats of communications in traditional forms. Although Obama realized the ongoing potential of engaging with constituents through the use of new media and made heavy use of it during his campaign for office, as president, he has yet to fully successfully leverage it. As Owen and Davis (2008, p. 660) warn

Presidential administrations seeking to generate positive publicity for their programs and policies see the potential in new media to get their message out on their own terms. Realistically, however, the White House has approached new media with some trepidation and reserve. Tactics
that may be effective in other contexts, such as political campaigns, are not necessarily appropriate for governing and may even backfire. The president’s national constituency, the breath of executive branch leadership responsibilities, and the intensity of the spotlight shining on the office render the adaptation of Internet media strategies more difficult than for other government entities.

Since the conclusion of the First 100 Days, we have seen more efforts at using web-based tools to “go public” and ask people to contact their legislators in support of the presidents’ policies. These efforts fall prey to similar roadblocks faced by presidents who do so on television. Kernell and Rice (2011) found that in the cable era presidents’ audiences have become increasingly skewed towards their supporters. We suspect this tendency is further exacerbated online. “The Blog” and the weekly web address are unlikely to draw large audiences and the presidents’ strongest supporters are those most likely to devote time to reading or watching. Such small and ideologically skewed audiences mean limited opportunities for widespread influence. However, one notable difference exists between making appeals on television or posting them online – the latter are far more accessible to an international audience. Today, presidents’ communications strategies, intentionally or not, appeal to both a domestic and international audience.

Although President Obama expanded presidential communication to include weekly web addresses and a White House blog, we find that the primary communications strategies used within them bear much resemblance to those of the Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan. Like Reagan, Obama attempted to build unity through inclusiveness, re-characterized ideological principles to build broader support for his policies, and blamed the prior administration for the state of the economy. These general themes largely reflect traditional goals of newly elected presidents who have a different party affiliation than their predecessor. Like both Reagan and George W. Bush, efforts at building unity and bipartisanship had limited success. Obama’s partisan gap in approval as he neared the end of his First 100 Days was 62 points. Reagan’s gap at the same period of his term was 41 and George W. Bush’s was 58 (Gallup 2012).

As our brief history of presidential communication helped make clear, the constraints of the role of president seem to generate caution rather than embrace of new technologies. While the Obama administration will likely continue to pioneer presidential use of various forms of internet communication as Clinton and Bush did before him, it is likely that presidential communication will continue to lag behind what the internet makes possible. Time will tell whether this pioneering in communications use will later translate into the development of new, more effective strategies for presidential success.
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