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Inventing the Election: Civic Participation and Presidential Candidates' Websites

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Abstract

In this article I propose a three-part schema for analyzing and categorizing the civic participatory potential of three presidential candidates' websites. Focusing my analysis on the sites of Barack Obama, John McCain, and Mitt Romney, I examine how the rhetorical and technological features of the sites' interfaces promote robust, moderate, or superficial participatory invention, interaction, and dialogue. My research highlights the ways in which the design of websites may enable users to become more active agents in political campaigns and in the election process. In addition, the three-part schema I propose provides what I hope will be a useful analytic lens for writing instructors to use when seeking to engage students with civic rhetorical analysis.

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1. Introduction

As Americans become increasingly reliant on the Internet as an information source, candidates are continuously reevaluating how to harness the power of the Internet to reach potential voters and mold presidential campaigns. Results from a 2007 [Pew Research publication](#) showed that “15% of all American adults say the Internet was the primary source for campaign news during the [2006] election, up from 7% in the mid-term election of 2002 and close to the 18% of Americans who said they relied on the Internet during the presidential campaign cycle in 2004” (p. 1). The study also found that 35% of those polled who are under the age of 36 cited the Internet as being their main source of political information in the 2006 mid-term election (p. 3). Given this information, campaigns are clearly invested in marshalling the affordances of the Internet to their advantage. Today, candidates' websites are not only used as venues for financing campaigns but they construct candidates, platforms, and the electorate itself.

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While websites perform an aesthetic function in helping to define a candidate's image, they also serve as meeting places where potential voters can organize their participation in the campaign. This participation comes in the form of invention activities that both operate within the space of the website and reach beyond the website by encouraging other avenues for involvement. For example, forums such as blogs and message boards encourage a dialogue among website users on the issues that comprise the core of the candidate's platform. Here, users may also arrange to take part in meetings, rallies, or discussions in their communities. Through candidates' websites, users are encouraged to become "active" citizens—contributors to, and not passive observers of, democratic processes. Because of their participatory capabilities, I believe these campaign websites warrant increased scholarly attention. If citizens are increasingly interested in using websites as forums for political participation, then we must better understand how to foster that participation, making it both meaningful to citizens and efficacious to our democratic processes.

How people participate in civic spheres has always been a concern of rhetoric. With the incorporation of technologies such as websites and blogs into political campaigns, we in rhetoric and composition must focus our attention not only on how citizens use these technologies to participate in the campaign but also on how they might be more meaningfully served by these technologies in the future. Although this particular study centers on the 2008 presidential campaign, I hope that its focus on the connection between civic participation and Internet-based technology can illuminate other applicable contexts for increased user involvement (i.e., online community-based participation). Based on my examination of the websites of John McCain, Barack Obama, and Mitt Romney,¹ I have developed a three-part schema describing different levels of user participation: superficial, moderate, and robust (Figure 1). In doing so, I wish to highlight the ways in which websites reach beyond merely "informing" users. Websites designed to the end of enabling civic participation can reach beyond superficial functions to help users become more active agents in their communities, schools, and country.

To demonstrate the participatory potential of websites, I will first provide an overview of recent scholarship on civic participation. I will also draw upon public sphere theory to establish my three-part schema for participation. Then I will theorize the interface, arguing for more user-centered design strategies. Finally, I will use my schema as a framework for analyzing the websites of Barack Obama, John McCain, and Mitt Romney and will propose several implications of this work. With this in mind, I turn my focus to the specific context of the 2008 presidential election to see how citizens are harnessing the power of the Internet to become involved in choosing the next President of the United States.

2. Approaches to civic participation

In thinking about how to situate the concept of participation in this project, I find it productive to think of participation as operating along a continuum of active involvement and

¹ I intentionally chose at least one candidate from the two major political parties. I made these selections after looking at multiple candidates' websites; these three candidates were most representative of my three levels of participation.

Level of participation	Description	Roles and actions of users
Robust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides multiple opportunities for users to contribute content and engage with each other. Provides users the potential to publicly question or challenge assumptions/beliefs of the candidate or other users. The website is a forum for users to engage and participate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users are creators, planners, producers, designers, dissenters. They post to blogs, create social networking pages, upload videos, and plan events in order to engage with other users, the campaign, and the issues.
Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for fewer and less consequential user contributions. Provides limited attention to and opportunities for dissenting voices. The website is a forum that provides <i>some</i> opportunities to engage and participate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users have <i>some</i> opportunities to be creators, planners, producers, or designers; they are provided some space to voice dissent. They primarily engage in superficial activities such as filling out polls and forwarding scripted emails.
Superficial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides few, if any, opportunities for user contributions and engagement. Silences dissenters by not allowing space for their comments. The website serves as an advertisement for the candidate, not as a forum for participation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Users have <i>few, if any</i>, opportunities to be creators, planners, producers, or designers; they are not provided space to voice dissent. Users engage in activities such as filling out polls and forwarding scripted emails.

Fig. 1. The three levels of participation: robust, moderate, and superficial.

interaction. In relation to political websites, users might engage one end of this participatory continuum by simply reading the material on the website (what one reviewer of this article called “participation that doesn’t leave tracks”). Further along the continuum, toward more active involvement, users might click a button to respond to a survey question. Toward the more robust end of the participatory continuum, users might post a comment in a blog discussion forum. In addition, users’ participation may or may not remain limited to the realm

of a candidate's website. For example, users can utilize a message board to announce a campaign event that they are sponsoring. In this case, while the user's announcement would leave visible tracks on the website, the "participation" would take place offline, merely instigated or arranged through the website. Because I see interaction as a crucial component of civic participation, my research focuses on the end of the continuum where participatory engagement becomes more active on the part of the user, whether or not that engagement is limited to online spaces.

My understanding of participation is influenced by the work of [Simmons and Grabill \(2007\)](#) who, in their recent *College Composition and Communication* article "Toward a Civic Rhetoric" argued that "Participation requires that citizens also have an understanding of complex issues in order to articulate their experiences and participate in public conversation and offer valuable contributions to any decision" (p. 420). Within this model, the primary step toward participation is that citizens garner an understanding of complex issues. The rhetorical situation of a presidential campaign brings many issues to the fore, arguably all of them replete with nuance and complexity. A campaign website, then, must situate these issues in ways that do not wash over crucial details, at the same time making these issues accessible to the average website user. In other words, websites must enable visitors to invent usable knowledge. When users combine what they already know about the issues with the information provided on the website, they arrive at an understanding of the issues, an understanding that they can then use as a springboard to eventually making what Simmons and Grabill called "valuable contributions."

I see the idea of participatory invention as being a crucial component of civic rhetoric; drawing again on [Simmons and Grabill \(2007\)](#), I define participatory invention as acts of combining prior knowledge with new information. Simmons and Grabill argued that the ability of users to engage in acts of invention assumes the utmost importance when one considers that "the issues that most communities face as they imagine who they are and what they might be require what rhetoricians have always understood to be acts of invention" (p. 423). In this sense, invention acts as a bridge between what is known and what needs to be known in order to achieve desired ends. As outlined in Janice Lauer's *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition* (2004), Thomas Farrell conceived of invention in civic discourse as an "intersection" that "recombines and individuates received opinions and convention in order to interrupt everyday policy and practice" (p. 111). Users seeking to "interrupt" inadequate policies and practices may use websites as a means of recombining their opinions with new information in order to imagine more effective policies and practices. This level of participation, however, requires that websites provide the proper channels for distributing and acting on users' invented knowledge, channels that lead to capable audiences. Otherwise, the progression between invention and participation breaks down, leaving users to seek out other methods of participation or decline to participate altogether.

Another crucial component of civic rhetoric is, as [Simmons and Grabill \(2007\)](#) argued, the fact that citizens must have the means to make "valuable contributions" in (the) public sphere(s). I am drawing my definition of public spheres from Gerard Hauser (1999), who situated public spheres as "nested domain[s] of particularized arenas or multiple spheres populated by participants who, by adherence to standards of reasonableness reflected in the vernacular language of conversational communication, discover their interests, where they converge or differ, and how their differences might be accommodated" (p. 56). While Hauser's "standards

of reasonableness” are admittedly problematic, I find this definition useful in its emphasis on difference. Entrance into Hauser’s public spheres requires the convergence of difference, something that is bound to happen when users employ their understandings of complex issues to “articulate their experiences and participate in public conversation” (Simmons & Grabill, 2007, p. 420). The inevitability of difference within public spheres highlights the need for websites to provide multiple entry points for users so that a variety of needs and preferences might be accommodated. With multiple entry points, all users should be able to see themselves reflected in the interface (Bolter & Gromala, 2003). In perceiving websites as public spheres, I am drawing on both Simmons and Grabill and Hauser’s work to construct a participatory framework in which users come to websites to engage complex information, invent usable knowledge, and cut across difference to offer their contributions.

The kind of participation that interests me here, then, involves instances of communication within the campaign when voter interests, opinions, and suggestions are placed into dialogue. I will term this level of participation “robust,” implying that within the framework of Hauser’s public sphere, citizens assume an effectual role in influencing the discourse of the campaign. According to Hauser’s definition, “dialogue” implies the convergence of difference; thus, a robust level of participation enables dialogue that honors voices that may question or challenge the embedded beliefs and assumptions of a candidate and/or political party’s platform. A less fully realized level of participation allows citizens to influence the discourse of the campaign in very tangential or less consequential ways; this I will refer to as a “moderate” level of participation. This level of participation would also suggest limited attention to and opportunities for dissenting voices. Finally, instances when citizens are asked to contribute in very limited ways will be subsumed under what I will call a “superficial” level of participation.

Not only are dissenters silenced at the “superficial” level, it also seriously restricts the voices of all visitors to the website. In this scenario, citizens feel as though they are contributing—that their voices are being “heard”—but in reality, their input is either confined to relatively inconsequential matters or fails to be disseminated within productive mechanisms of communication.

Before presenting my analysis of the civic participatory potential of candidates’ websites employing this three-part schema, I will first briefly discuss some approaches for understanding interfaces and the ways they may (or may not) enable participation.

3. Enabling participation through the interface

How, then, can website interfaces facilitate civic participation, particularly within the complex rhetorical situation of a presidential campaign? A website that enables multiple ways of reading, assembling, and understanding data and other forms of information encourages the invention activities necessary for participation. In imagining website interfaces that invite and enable citizen engagement, I find the work of both Wysocki and Powazek helpful. Together, Wysocki’s theorizing of interfaces and Powazek’s focus on design for community provide a concrete framework for websites that invite robust participation.

The “generosity” of interfaces is a concept drawn from Anne Wysocki’s articles “*Impossibly Distinct*” (2001) and “*What Should be an Unforgettable Face*” (2004), the latter co-authored with Julia Jasken. Wysocki and Jasken argued that “interfaces are thoroughly rhetorical: Inter-

faces are about the relations we construct with each other—how we perceive and try to shape each other—through the artifacts we make for each other” (p. 33). Because interfaces construct their users, Wysocki and Jasken encouraged designers² to undertake all decisions with great care. Wysocki (2001) established the foundation for these claims in “Impossibly Distinct,” in which she encouraged designers to be aware of the assumptions that interfaces contain and the argument(s) those assumptions might suggest. By not creating “generous” interfaces—not allowing for multiple means of entry, interaction, and engagement—designers risk enacting assumptions that can potentially alienate or silence users. Together, these articles presented the interface as being just as influential as alphabetic text alone in creating a relationship with audiences. Through this realization, we can come to design interfaces that do not treat audiences reductively, assuming that all people will be coming to the interface for the same reason or will interact with the interface in the same way.

Meaningful interaction through website interfaces, according to Powazek’s (2002) book *Design for Community*, is tied to the rigor of the online community; this rigor is fostered by design choices made at even the most structural levels. He claimed that

The key to creating a vibrant online community is to interlink the content and community at the most granular level possible. That way the content is always acting as an example and inspiration for the community. The community, in turn, becomes active in the content of the site, and even sometimes help feed back ideas to the authors of the content. This forms a positive feedback loop that benefits both the community and the content. (n.p.)

For Powazek, a commitment to involving the community must be established early on when designers are constructing a sitemap, the point of design that he referred to as the “granular level.” If ways of connecting the community to the content of the website are embedded in the very structure of the website, then communication among designers and community members is much more likely. The “loop” that Powazek saw as joining community, designers, and content can also serve as a connective mechanism between members of communities that otherwise might not have an opportunity to communicate. With this in mind, the democratic process relies, at least in part, on the ability for community members—members of various public spheres who may or may not be like-minded—to share and grapple with their invented knowledge. With their ability to loop information between various actors, along with offering multiple means of engagement, candidates’ websites can provide opportunities for robust participation to occur.

4. Three candidates, three interfaces

Participation takes many forms within the websites of Barack Obama, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. All three attempt to create a feedback loop of sorts, encouraging interaction between campaign workers, potential voters, and other community members, but to varying

² I am using the term “designer” to represent the person or persons responsible for creating websites. I chose this term over “author” or “creator” to emphasize the multiplicity of choices for which web page designers are responsible, including text, images, sound, structure—all of which I consider to be constitutive of the overall “design” of the interface.

degrees of effectiveness. Because campaign websites seek to provide current information, they are updated quite frequently, sometimes changing several times in one day. The versions of the three websites I will be analyzing appeared at various points from 15 April 2007 to 06 January 2008. The sites have undoubtedly undergone alterations since those dates but their basic structures and respective rhetorical approaches have remained fairly consistent over time. Despite their day-to-day changes, these websites represent particular design philosophies that, in part, strive to enable user participation.³

4.1. Barack Obama's website: A robust participatory interface

Perhaps most noticeable about Barack Obama's website is its emphasis on allowing users a great deal of agency in customizing both the website itself and their interaction with the campaign. Within the section entitled “<My.BarackObama.com>” there are several options available to customize users' interaction with the site, providing a gateway to knowledge production (see Figure 2). After registering, users gain access to several options, among them an “Events” option which allows them to sign up for planned campaign events and, perhaps more importantly, plan new events. Doing so requires legwork on the part of the user such as researching the times and locations of other functions and coming up with a unique approach that would provide a memorable and unique experience for attendees. Events range from informal discussions at private homes to canvassing neighborhoods. A Springboro, Ohio event entitled, “NH Stand for Change Party (New Hampshire Watch Party)” described the event as “A get together to watch New Hampshire polls and discuss what more we can do for this campaign.” The contact information of the host and a map of the location is provided with the event description, making the event accessible to anyone willing to make the trip. A nearby Trenton, Ohio event focuses on organizing a group of supporters on Ohio's primary date to canvass surrounding neighborhoods encouraging people to vote. Through this option, users are executing tasks at the grassroots level that in past elections have been relegated solely to the official staff of campaign managers and other organizers. Users are able to engage the community in a very concrete sense by pooling their ideas/plans with other interested members. This option is reminiscent of Powazek's (2002) call for interlinking content and community by offering an accessible design feature that can be used to the end of assembling community members. Through this option, users are able to engage more meaningfully by influencing the way that the campaign and its issues are talked about and experienced within their particular locations.

Particularly with its inclusion of the <My.BarackObama.com> option, Obama's website enables opportunities for invention within multiple spaces: web design, blogs, user networks, and community events, among others. These spaces of invention build on the information provided by the site, allowing users to harness this new knowledge in creative ways. For example, the “Issues” link opens to a page that provides brief summaries of Obama's positions on various topics. Clicking on a topic will then bring the user to a page that provides more detail on the topic. Perhaps most interesting, however, is that once users read Obama's stance

³ A brief note on methodology: I recognize the limitations of the textual analysis upon which this paper relies. In this paper I am addressing the *potential* for participation; I do not yet have data that speaks to whether that potential is being fulfilled with actual users.



Fig. 2. The Obama website on 23 April 2007. The “<MyBarackObama.com>” option is visible in the lower middle of the page.

on the issue, they can then move to the side of the page where there is a section entitled “MyPolicy.” Here, users are met with the following message: “Across our country, everyday people like you have experiences and ideas that haven’t previously been heard. This is your chance to speak your mind and help set the policies that will guide this campaign and change the country” (<http://www.barackobama.com>). Users are able to “speak their mind” via a three step process the site defines as “presenting ideas” (by sharing a story via text, uploading a video, or recording a message), “collaborating and debating” those ideas, and “defining a new direction.”

Participation is also enabled through the multiple points of entry allowed by the website’s interface. From the homepage, users can access several video feeds, read the text of newspaper articles, or create their own blog, to name a few options. Integrating multiple modes and genres speaks to Simmons and Grabill’s (2007) call for designs that allow for “multiple entry points, multiple types of questions, and multiple angles of investigation to allow citizens to invent usable knowledge from the available information” (p. 434). These multiple points of entry also acknowledge different audiences and the reasons why those audiences might be coming to the website. The site’s well-developed “answer center,” for example, provides a forum for users to access a record of Obama’s “official positions” on a wide variety of issues and also to email a personalized question. This section is structured in a way that allows the user to view

similar questions and answers and browse related questions and answers. Within this space, users are encouraged to situate themselves in the discourse of the campaign, adjusting their answer search to their specific interests. Regardless of the background or the perspective of the user, Obama's website seeks to provide new information and accommodate the varied needs of potential voters.

Through its multiple points of entry, generous interface, and opportunities for invention, the site opens up significant possibilities for user participation.⁴ Through the Events, Blog, and Network options, interested users can undertake an effectual role within the discourse of the campaign if they so choose. The inclusion of the <My.BarackObama.com> forum poises users to shape the campaign in ways not possible in previous elections. The links at the bottom of the page to Facebook, PartyBuilder, YouTube and Flickr harness the opportunities made possible by what *Time* has called the “new digital democracy,” the influx of user-generated knowledge and collaboration made possible by Internet-based networking tools (Grossman, 2006). Users can post to blogs, create social networking pages, upload videos, and plan events in order to engage with other users, the campaign, and the issues. The website positions its users as creators, planners, producers, and designers. While the site creates a carefully constructed image of its candidate, it allows users considerable agency in molding the discourse of that candidate’s campaign.

4.2. John McCain’s website: A moderate participatory interface

The multiple entry points of John McCain’s website seem to reflect a similar approach of providing the user access to video, text, and sound within the homepage interface (see Figure 3). One seemingly innocuous means of entry into the site is a poll located at the bottom middle of the page. Asking users to select the “worst” examples of pork barrel spending, it then requires them to enter their name, address, zip code, and email address. Although it is not specified how these responses will be used, by whom, or for what purpose, the page does assure users that completing this survey will “make their voices heard.”⁵

Serving as means of entry for users, the poll seems to represent one way in which McCain’s site seeks to attract multiple audiences. Checking off items from a list allows users to make their preferences and concerns known. What remains unclear, however, is whether/how participating in this poll might influence the discourse of the McCain campaign. Users may be under the impression that the poll “data” informs future campaign decisions and/or approaches; this assumption is neither confirmed nor denied on the website. Additionally, the poll format forces users to conform to one of the choices offered, severely limiting complexity of opinion. Perhaps the most obvious gesture towards the website’s multiple audiences is the “involving you” area, which provides users several options for “getting involved in John McCain’s campaign

⁴ While Obama’s website takes great strides toward fostering a meaningful dialogue among users, it does not represent dissenting voices (although it remains unclear whether the website has, in fact, removed any comments challenging Obama’s stances). Because of this, it does not fully enable the kind of participation outlined in Hauser’s vision of public spheres. Including dissenting voices would allow Obama’s website to more fully match the criteria for a robust participatory website.

⁵ Having emailed all three website operators without a personalized response, it remains unclear who exactly reads user feedback.

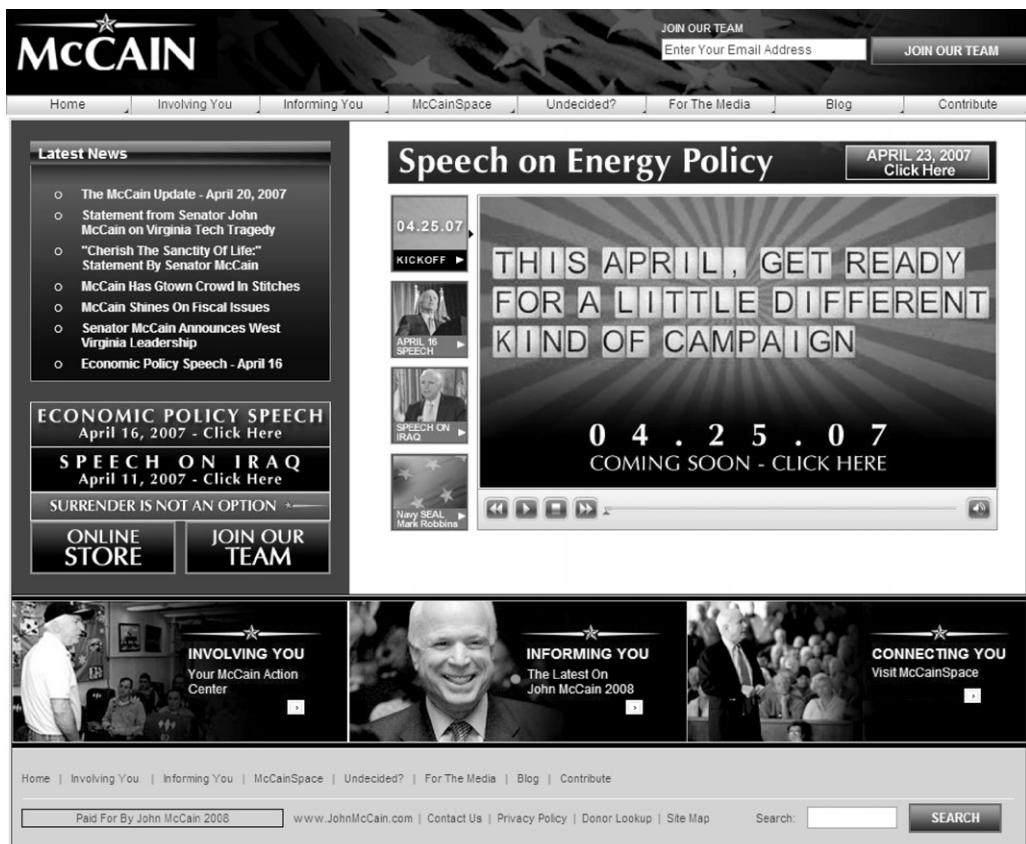


Fig. 3. On 23 April 2007, the McCain website touted the April 25th beginning of his official campaign.

for President" (<http://www.johnmccain.com>). Clicking on the "involving you" link on the homepage brings users to a page entitled "Action Center," a location where users are urged to take a more active role in the campaign. Within this space users can create their own web page, as on Obama's website. Part of the process of doing so involves the option of checking off various demographics with which users identify (in a move similar to the poll option), some of which are "youth," "entrepreneurs," "veterans," and "Americans of Faith." A second checklist on the same page asks users to "tell us how you can help" and offers several options such as becoming a precinct captain or putting up a yard sign. As with the poll, it is not made clear what happens to this information once users go through the appropriate motions. Even so, the checklists and "inviting" language of McCain's site (one page in particular uses the word "team" five times in separate headings and sections) suggest an awareness that although supporters belong to the McCain "team," the team consists of multiple needs that must be acknowledged.

One of the more promising characteristics of the McCain website is its willingness to give voice to dissenting opinions. It opens up the possibility for true dialogue by allowing blog posts that question McCain. One such post challenges a comment made by McCain during the New Hampshire debates:

Your comment about how Canadian go to US for their health care. As Canadian I am offended with your comment. Not one single Canadian that is living in Canada has had to declare bankruptcy due to health cost yet in US 50% of all know bankruptcies are due to your citizens can not pay for their healthcare bills. . . If you asked any Canadian if they would like to switch with your system the resounding answer would be NO (11:37 PM, 01/05/08, twills)⁶.

Within one day, this post spurred 13 replies from fellow bloggers, some supportive of twills's position, some not. While some of the unsupportive responses lapsed into ad hominem attacks, overall the post generated some substantive debate regarding various countries' healthcare systems. In allowing users to publicly question the candidate, McCain's website is opening up a space for voters to work through their ideas and concerns regarding policy.

While the McCain website implements several options that encourage a robust level of user participation, these options seem overshadowed by other more superficial attempts at involving users. Even when users are encouraged to make their voices heard, their contributions are limited by the poll and checklist formats. The "Action Center," ostensibly a space devoted to garnering user involvement, strictly defines what "actions" users can take. More encouraging are the options to create new blogs and websites, as are the links to Facebook, MySpace, Eventful, and YouTube. The McCain website designers seem to sense that new tools such as YouTube may be productive pathways to user involvement, but the site appears hesitant on how to incorporate these tools, which are often backgrounded or offered in restrictive ways. In this sense, the website interface fails to be "generous" with its more visually-oriented media. Users who find these tools more engaging than text may be at a disadvantage in finding the information they need.

In fact, even the language of the site implies limitations for users' actions. The three "interactive" sections of "involving you," "informing you," and "connecting you" positions the campaign as the active agent, thereby limiting user agency. The implied subject of these phrases is "we," the McCain campaign: [We're] involving you, [we're] informing you, [we're] connecting you. As [Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe \(1994\)](#) warned, the interface can operate as a site in which power legacies are rewritten, even when under the guise of being inviting. Particularly when contrasted with Obama's phrasing—[you] network with your friends, [you] write your own blog, [you] plan and attend events—the McCain website seems to be hesitant about allowing users to become producers of technology. Viewed through the lens of community engagement, it also seems hesitant about allowing the website to serve as a link between content and community, as [Powazek \(2002\)](#) advocates. While some aspects of the site, such as the "action center," suggest that the website's designers seem aware of the need to incorporate this type of engagement, the designers still cling to the notion that websites are, above all else, a forum for inscribing a candidate's image/message. Because of its limitations, the McCain website only allows for a moderate level of user participation.

4.3. Mitt Romney's website: A superficial participatory interface

Like both of the other candidates, Mitt Romney's website includes several links designed to provide the user with the candidate's position on various policies and issues (see [Figure 4](#)).

⁶ The text of this blog post has not been altered from how it appeared on the blog.



Fig. 4. Romney's image as a family man is reflected in the homepage's multiple pictures of his wife and in the "Five Brothers" blog (visible at the top of the page), written by his sons.

From the homepage, users can access "Quick Links," the first of which is entitled "Defeating the Jihadists." Along with brief summaries of his position on this and other issues, users are also provided with direct quotes from Romney culled from a variety of newspapers and other sources. Having access to short policy statements as spoken by the candidate himself allows users to offer persuasive evidence when seeking to invent usable knowledge in a variety of forums. Some forums suggested by the website are located under the heading "You can help us by" and include "recruiting others to join Team Mitt" and "sharing info about Mitt"—both possible sites of invention where the Romney campaign would like supporters to initiate/contribute to a discussion about Romney's strengths as a candidate. As with the other two websites, a basic knowledge about the candidate is provided along with the tools for creating additional opportunities to expand on and communicate that knowledge.

Opportunities for users to engage with the website in multiple ways are more limited than on Obama's or McCain's web pages. Noticeably absent is the option to create one's own web page. Instead, users are offered the option of making the Romney site their homepage, which they cannot alter or customize in any way. In taking this approach, the Romney campaign is orchestrating its image, not allowing users to mold information about Romney into a new web

space; lost is an opportunity for encouraging users to create a personalized identity as a Romney supporter within the framework of the website. Other options for users include contributing to the Five Brothers Blog (named for Romney's five sons) and sending out invitations for friends to join Romney's cause. Both options, however, allow little room for users to "own" the technology. Based on recent entries, the Five Brothers Blog focuses more on the experience of running a campaign than it does on substantive policy discussion.⁷ The option to send invitations to friends involves little more than attaching email addresses to a prepared message that begins,

At <MittRomney.com>, I've been learning about Team Mitt, the national network of grassroots supporters of Governor Romney and his presidential campaign. When you get a chance, I'd encourage you to take a look at the biographical video about Governor Romney listed at the end of this message. The video does an impressive job of detailing the accomplishments, the character and the values of the man who I believe should be elected our next President in 2008. (<<http://www.mitromney.com>>).

Rather than attempting to involve users in the construction of the interface—and the construction of themselves as users of the interface—the Romney website seems more focused on maintaining a carefully crafted image (<<http://www.mitromney.com>>).

While Romney's website presents a groomed image of its candidate, it allows for only a superficial level of user participation, the primary avenue of interaction being the blog option. A look at recent entries, however, shows that even this forum tends to avoid discussions of Romney's platform. While the Romney brothers take turns describing their day on the campaign trail, the typical user comment falls along the lines of, "What a beautiful family! You are doing such a great job for your dad, it's fun to be able to see the events and people you all are involved with on the campaign trail. Keep up the good work!" (11:56, 12/07/07, Tia). Not surprisingly, dissenting voices are not found in any of the website's forums. In fact, the website seems the equivalent of a television or radio ad transplanted onto the Internet: information moves primarily in one direction rather than looping between a variety of agents as Powazek's (2002) model encourages. Romney's website expects users to be a passive audience. The website serves as an advertisement for the candidate, not as a forum for participation. Although it provides Romney with an Internet presence, it does little to capitalize on the affordances of digital media. In essence, not many opportunities for dialogue exist within the Romney site, limiting the amount of influence users can exercise within the campaign's discourse.

Similarly, Romney's website largely avoids opportunities for users to "find themselves" within the interface. The website focuses on Romney's perspective (on issues, on family) and backgrounds users' perspectives. Instead, the website tells users how they can "help"—by raising money, by sharing information about Mitt—thus locating the campaign as the agent of control. This kind of audience stance leaves little room for robust user participation. The means by which users could participate would actually contain very little of their own voice; rather, users would serve as distributors of information, merely channeling Romney's "message" to other potential voters and money to the campaign. In essence, this example of the superficial

⁷ Recent entries included a physical comparison of each of the Romney brothers to various celebrities and a call for suggestions on what to name their tour bus.

level defines participation so narrowly that it actually discourages any kind of audience interaction that would alter or add to the image of Romney portrayed in the website. In other words, these users are expected to be a passive audience, to consume and not produce.

5. Implications

All three websites seem to recognize the need to enable some sort of space for participatory invention and interactivity, but the ways by which they go about addressing those needs fall along the continuum of robust, moderate, or superficial participation. Within Obama's site, the most robust of the three, users are enabled—and encouraged—to engage in multiple invention activities and participate in the campaign's discourse. Obama's users can develop and hone what [Selber \(2004\)](#) called "rhetorical literacy," a concept that repositions users as "producers" of technologies. For Selber, "[users] who are rhetorically literate will recognize the persuasive dimensions of human-computer interfaces and the deliberative and reflective aspects of interface design, all of which is not a purely technical endeavor but a form of social action" (p. 140). The "social action" that Obama's website allows is multifaceted and enabled by its willingness to honor (some) voters' voices. I qualify the term "voters" here because there seems to be little deliberation or even disagreement among this particular online community. Representing voices of dissonance within the website would construct a more valuable and realistic dialogue. In fact, by conceiving of audience as more than simply like-minded individuals, all three candidates can enrich opportunities for robust dialogue within their sites.

All three websites can also spur robust participation by expanding their feedback loop to include the websites' designers, as [Powazek \(2002\)](#) suggests. Both Obama and McCain have developed fairly effective mechanisms for users to communicate with each other (Romney, less so), but none of the websites provide much feedback from designers. While they all contain a "contact us" link, all three websites provided me with a scripted message when I tried to communicate with them. Although it would be unreasonable to expect the campaigns to respond to every personal message, a forum where users could communicate with the website designers would create a more effective feedback loop between content, community, and designers. This way, designers could hear from users themselves about what they want or need from a political website in order to participate.

In addition to designers, I see my participatory framework as being applicable to students, providing them with a lens through which they might critically examine texts and/or media. In order to critically engage with the messages that bombard them daily, students might look to some of the questions raised in this essay: Are there multiple ways to interact with the text? Does the text offer/open opportunities for dialogue? How can information be used to invent usable knowledge in other contexts? Whether the text is a website or a piece of fiction or a television commercial, students can use this schema to help read and write the word and the world ([Blackburn, 2003; Freire & Macedo, 1987](#))—to actively engage and not just passively consume texts. As a composition instructor, I have found it productive for students to conduct civic rhetorical analyses of texts, determining how they, individually or as a demographic, are being included in or excluded from decisions within their dorms, campus, city, or country. I have used the three-part schema in my own first-year composition class as a heuristic for

showing how websites, flyers, or emails encourage or deflect citizen involvement. Engaging in this kind of analysis provides students with an awareness of both how they are being written and how they might write themselves as citizens.

In articulating the ways in which I see civic participation enabled or disabled by these three websites, I aim to bring further awareness to the importance of generous interfaces—generosity that operates not as a pleasing aesthetic but, more importantly, as a means of invention. Because these opportunities for invention are located within the interface, design factors into the enabling of civic participation. Using technology to increase user participation is a desirable goal in any context, not merely the political. As the tools of the so-called digital democracy provide us with new mechanisms for participation, we must devote attention to how users can harness these tools to create a more informed and involved citizenry. Additionally, more effort should be made on the part of website designers to provide a forum for users where they can express what modes or tools they need in order to make productive contributions. Instead of assuming what users want or need, websites can become a place where the topic of participation itself is placed into dialogue. We need to scrutinize our technologies for opportunities for civic participation; perhaps the best way to do this is to place control of the technologies—even campaign websites—in the hands of citizens themselves.

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