

Barack Obama, Twitter, and the 'intimization' of politics

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2012's been quite a year for tweeters. First we had the Twitter Olympics. Now, Barack Obama's first impulse, on hearing of his re-election as President of the United States, was to tweet out thanks to the American electorate; soon followed with a joyous declaration of "four more years!", together with a photograph of the first couple embracing.

Back in 2010, the US [Library of Congress](#) announced it was compiling a Twitter Archive. The pithy, 140-character thoughts of millions would, so

the argument went, constitute an invaluable resource for [historians](#) of the future. Yesterday's [tweets](#) from team Obama are sure to have pride of place in the collection. This is because they encapsulate two important ideas. The first is that social media are a driving force in changing the nature of [political communication](#) - what it is, and where it happens. The second is that these changes have been afoot since the 1930s, and have gathered global pace over the last quarter of a century.

The Michelle/Barack hug, widely retweeted, is a testament to what UK scholar James Stanyer calls the deepening "intimization" of politics.

It's easy to think that Obama takes naturally to social media, alongside talk shows and the like, because he simply is a funny guy who can just about dance and is at ease with himself and his world. Stanyer, on the other hand, argues that all of this only matters because media politics compels politicians to spend more and more time telling the public about their homes, their families and even their sex lives.

Obama, in this sense, expresses a trend. And 'the hug' isn't a random picture. It is an image that is only possible because of a number of shifts in media politics that have been rumbling for some time.

Why was the hug one of the first images that the world saw of the re-elected President, and why has it been so widely shared? To find answers, we can look at how media have affected campaigning since the 1930s.

Much has been made of the fact that Obama has been the first President since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to be re-elected with US unemployment being as high as it is. The two men share something else; they have both been credited with grasping new media resources to establish intimate relationships with the electorate.

Back in 2008, American researchers who compared Obama and John McCain's social media strategies concluded that the former had a far better grasp of what social media are for. Team McCain saw Facebook and Twitter as simply another means of getting information out to voters. Team Obama understood that these media were about striking up relationships.

According to media historian Dennis Ryffe, Roosevelt had managed the same trick in the 1930s. Roosevelt's famous 'Fireside Chats' used radio's unique capacity to create the impression that the speaker was speaking directly to the listener – to you - to reassure Americans that the President cared and could fix things, even as the Depression bit hard.

By the 1940s, sociologists were finding that the public had developed considerable social investments in paying attention to political messages. In their study of 'opinion leaders' in the late 1940s, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld discovered that knowing about and sharing media content had become a vital source of social status for people who otherwise had little or none. Being able to update friends on the latest developments in political campaigns was a source of peer group kudos. Social media sharing is a clear continuation of this dynamic.

In the 1960s, attention turned to television. Much is made of the famous Kennedy/Nixon debate. But Stanyer argues that the defining aspect of Kennedy's media policy was his willingness to literally let the media into his home. This began a trend across OECD nations, where more and more time is spent looking at leaders' houses, their spouses, their children, their birthdays and their holidays. The casual intimacy of the Michelle/Barack hug makes perfect sense within this history.

So, the 'change' wrought by [social media](#) over American politics is no change at all. Of course Obama would turn to [Twitter](#) first upon confirmation his victory, and of course one of the first things he would

do is tweet a picture of a hug with the First Lady. Many US Presidents have found success by using media to enchant and energise voters with intimate moments. Taking to the phones to personally thank campaign volunteers, walking out on to the victory stage with your family, taking a moment to warn your daughters that re-election does not mean a second dog, and inviting the world to share a picture are all part of the same dynamic; the relentless intimization of media politics.

Provided by Monash University

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