

## Web Campaigns: Popular Culture and Politics in the U.S. and French Presidential Elections

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the campaign websites of presidential candidates during the 2007 election in France and the 2008 presidential campaign in the U.S. Positing the Internet and social networks as a manifestation of popular culture, it examines the reasons for the use of information technology in electoral campaigns. It also attempts to elucidate the reasons for the adoption of the codes of popular culture by exploring the concept of informalization as well as the significance of emotion in online campaign strategies.

**Keywords:** Internet, elections, campaigns, politics, website, popular culture, emotion, informality, aesthetics, Facebook, YouTube.

**RESUMEN:** El presente estudio examina las páginas *web* de las campañas electorales de los candidatos presidenciales en las elecciones de 2007 en Francia y 2008 en EEUU respectivamente. Desde la consideración de *internet* y las redes sociales como manifestaciones de la cultura popular, se exploran las razones para el uso de las tecnologías de la información en las campañas electorales. Igualmente, se pretende dilucidar los motivos para esa utilización de los códigos de la cultura popular mediante el análisis de los conceptos de informalidad y el papel de la emoción en las estrategias políticas en línea.

**Palabras clave:** Internet, elecciones, campañas políticas, sitio web, cultura popular, emociones, informalidad, estética, Facebook, YouTube

Popular culture is an elusive concept whose definition is by no means straightforward. It is possible, however, to try and delimit its meaning, albeit at the cost of a degree of simplification, by pointing out the existence of three major strands in the definition attempts carried out over the years. One of these strands emerged in the nineteenth century and identified popular culture as folklore in all its guises in pre-industrial societies. Popular culture was essentialized or, to put it differently, interpreted as the core of a given nation, and simultaneously idealized as the spirit or the genius of the people. This theory gained prominence in Germany, but it also influenced all the Western countries which were then engaged in their nation-building processes (Mouchtouris, 2007: 46).

The second strand is more contemporary and is exemplified by sociological interpretations relying on social class, with Bourdieu being one of its major proponents (Bourdieu, 1979). For him as for other sociologists, popular culture is nothing but a poor man's version of elite, dominant culture. Popular culture is only derivative and hence lacks any creativity (Mouchtouris, 2007: 47). A related definition of popular culture originated in the Frankfurt school with philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1920s. In this conception, mass-produced cultural goods are opposed to elite, culturally legitimate art forms and are therefore rejected as mind-numbing productions (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1974).

These two strands in the conceptualization of popular culture clearly evidence a strong tendency to formulate value judgments about it, and are therefore inherently ideological. Even though they have been extremely influential throughout the twentieth century, they can hardly function as analytical tools.

The third and most recent strand, on the other hand, manages to sidestep the normative tendencies of its two predecessors by adopting a descriptive approach and changing its focus. Instead of embracing all aspects of a culture, it narrows down its angle to the mass media and their place in numerous areas of people's daily lives (Strinati, 2004: x). Following Horkheimer and Adorno's lead, but leaving aside all value judgments, mass media are interpreted as the major manifestation of popular culture. The mass media, now converging with information technology and the Internet, may be thus be seen as the crucial arena where social and political issues are expressed, negotiated, or hotly debated (Hall, 1981: 239; Kidd, 2007). The Internet, therefore, and the social practices it gives rise to can be interpreted as emanations of popular culture. The conceptualization of the Internet as a manifestation of popular culture underpins the present paper.

As politicians have both widened and deepened their use of the Internet over the past decade, they have taken a turn towards the forms of popular culture that have evolved around the network, so that an important question arises: what

accounts for the introduction of the Internet and hence of popular culture in electioneering practices?

The present study will attempt to answer this question through a comparative analysis of candidates' websites during the 2007 presidential election in France, and the 2008 presidential race in the United States. The comparative approach has been chosen because it enables a more accurate analysis, inasmuch as an interpretive hypothesis can be subjected to control in different contexts (Vigour, 2005: 128). Indeed, the comparison between these two countries is likely to shed light on the uses being developed for the Internet by politicians and their campaign staff, perhaps even leading to the formulation of general principles, and underscoring the convergence of practices in modern democracies.

## **1. Historical Overview**

The introduction of popular culture in electoral campaigns is by no means a recent phenomenon, whether in the United States or in France. In fact, it can be said to be inextricably linked to the rise of universal suffrage characterizing modern politics. As politicians had to be voted into office by vast swaths of the population who had little or no grasp of the issues being debated, and sometimes even less interest in them, they could no longer remain within the closed, patrician circle of professional lawmakers. They had to explain to a wide public the main points of their platform if they were to win over the people, to gain their support and their recognition and in so doing, to obtain the legitimacy required to act as leaders of the people. Politicians therefore connected with the people by using all the media available to them. From broadsheets in the eighteenth century to the penny press in the nineteenth century, from monthly news and commentary magazines to ladies' journals, every medium was put to use to convey political messages in easily accessible language (Boller, 2004). The advent of radio only intensified the trend, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famous "fireside chats" garnering massive, enthusiastic audiences (Jamieson, 1984: 21). Television, in its turn, was embedded in the strategies of all political parties starting with Kennedy's election in 1960 and has remained to this day the major playing field of any electoral campaign (Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1991: 109; Freedman, Franz and Goldstein, 2004; Gillmor, 2004: 90; Rainie, 2007).

As of the 1996 elections in the United States, however, the Internet has slowly gained a foothold in the strategies of candidates in American elections (Bimber, 1998: 392; Foot and Schneider, 2002: 17; Chadwick, 2006: 152). But it was only during the following presidential race, in 2000, that all candidates made use of the possibilities offered by information technology to try and get more visibility by setting up an online presence. These early websites were largely

static; they provided documentation, pictures and daily updates of the candidates' activity, but offered no possibility for voters to interact with the campaign staff or add comments (Kamarck, 1999: 121; Serfaty, 2002 *b*).

The introduction of blogs in Howard Dean's 2004 campaign constituted a watershed inasmuch as it marked the insertion of supporter activity within the candidate's website; hundreds of volunteers created blogs to back Dean's bid for nomination and mobilize voters, and the links to these blogs appeared on Dean's official website. Large amounts of money were collected from small contributions, thus paving the way for a renewal of grassroots activism (Serfaty, 2006: 29; Perlmutter, 2008: 73). Then the 2008 campaign, starting with the primaries in early 2006, went one step further with the introduction of social networking in the blogs, with all the contenders creating pages on Facebook, MySpace, Friendster and other networks (Serfaty, 2009: 370).

In France, the introduction of information technology in political communication largely followed the same path, albeit with a short time lag. In its early stages, the Internet was only embraced by marginal parties that attempted to enlarge their audience and their impact thanks to this relatively low-cost new technology (Sauger, 2002: 180). Like in the U.S., the practice of maintaining an official election website also turned mainstream around the year 2000. This was when broadband Internet access became widespread in France, providing parties with a strong incentive to set up a site and to give their candidates an additional locus to deploy their campaign in, even though television still is the major media for electoral campaigns.

The methods used by campaign directors were similar to the ones prevailing in the U.S., with mainstream parties creating static websites, allowing no interactivity until the 2004 watershed, when individual politicians such as Dominique Strauss-Kahn, among others, started maintaining their own interactive blogs, where comments could be posted online. The 2007 presidential elections marked the true appropriation of the Internet by French presidential candidates, with both Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy putting up complex, elaborate websites and making full use of the possibilities of social networks. Political campaigns have thus integrated the main features of what is known as Web 2.0, a phrase which refers to all the technologies enabling interactivity and networking. Let us now examine the emerging evolution of the candidates' sites in the U.S. and in France alike.

## 2. Political Website Aesthetics

The word aesthetics is not normative and does not refer to the 'beauty' or lack thereof, of a website. It must be interpreted in its descriptive sense, and it

refers to the design of the site deriving both from its strictly functional aspects, such as coding, and from the choices made by the party or candidate or by the web designer. Studying the aesthetics of a candidate's website thus means analyzing the layout of all the elements it is made of, i.e., the interweaving of text, images, sound, video, hyperlinks and their position, pop-up windows, as well as the use of colors and animations. The next step is conceptualizing the aesthetics of a political website so as to gain an insight into the social practices it is likely to prompt.

Campaign websites have already developed an orthodox aesthetic, thus creating a set of expectations in the public and among web designers (Bolter, 2001: 41). This was recently further evidenced by a mini-scandal that arose in the French political sphere in September 2009, when the former presidential candidate, Socialist Ségolène Royal, tried to renovate her site while keeping its former name, "Désirs d'avenir". Her team uploaded a rudimentary website for which they charged her backers more than forty thousand euros, a very large sum by the industry's standards. The web design community felt so incensed by this sub-par production that hundreds of automatic website generators were quickly put up to parody Royal's crude "Désirs d'avenir" website,<sup>1</sup> while an art director published a scathing critique of the site in a national daily (Girardeau, 2009). Although more may have been at stake in this furore than mere aesthetic outrage, the incident does pinpoint the existence of a set of rules for online campaign sites.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that successful political websites comply with the dominant aesthetic of websites, showing deep, underlying similarities beneath the apparently diverse surfaces. It is important to note that the aesthetic of campaign websites cuts across the political spectrum; whether in the United States or in France, both right wing and left wing parties pay tribute to the same standards.

This aesthetic, then, is first characterized by a high degree of semiotic complexity: websites attain this complexity by fragmenting the surface and connecting widely dissimilar elements through hyperlinks (Serfaty, 2002 *b*: 79; Foot and Schneider, 2006: 57). In addition, the front page of a website offers a significant accumulation of disparate material: audio and video files, pie-charts, downloadable text files, campaign goods such as posters or T-shirts inscribed with campaign slogans (Serfaty, 2002 *b*: 78). The front page of a site gives access to three categories of contents: the first one is a repertoire of actions designed to mobilize the electorate; the second one is a full and regularly updated archive of the candidate's speeches, portraits, photo-ops and television appearances; the

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1. [http://www.damienh.fr/desirsdavenir\\_generator](http://www.damienh.fr/desirsdavenir_generator).

third one comprises the voters' supportive comments, their own pictures and sometimes their amateur videos of the candidate's speeches on the campaign trail (Serfaty, 2009: 370). The website is thus packed with information of all kinds, turning the screen into a saturated surface, in which every item is loaded with significance.

The juxtaposition of all these elements in the same visual space means that viewers have to pick their way through the page. Thus, maximum non-linearity characterizes websites: the viewer is supposed to make sense of the densely packed page by clicking the links, without any pre-defined pattern being imposed on the clicking process. The viewer thus unfolds the website elements at will, recreating the candidates' political narratives through her own personal navigation. In this way, the viewer transforms the space of the screen into an inhabited, lived-in place, just as pedestrians transform an anonymous street into a fully-fledged place through the motions of their bodies, while walking through it (Manovich, 2001: 239).

The non-linear and largely individualized perusal process can be seen as a way of creating a kind of limited narrative interactivity, inasmuch as viewers can pick and choose elements from within the general narrative framework provided by the website. However, starting in 2006, during the primary elections in the U.S. and starting in 2007 in France, during the presidential campaign, this embryonic interactivity was increasingly supplemented by the possibility for the viewer to submit comments or pictures and have them published on the candidates' pages on any number of social networks. Sometimes, as is the case for Clinton's and Mitt Romney's sites, a few lines of the supporters' blog entries appear in the lower half of the candidates' site, with a link that can be followed to read the entire post, thus mimicking the 'teasers' found on print newspapers' front page.

The new space given over to supporters and potential voters has had numerous repercussions on the candidates' political communication. Before exploring them, however, it is essential to bear in mind that supporters do not have unrestricted access to the candidates' space; all the sites are moderated by administrators who screen messages for offensive content (Wojcik, 2007: 338). Moderators also greet participants, launch topics for debate or weigh in to reframe issues, sometimes acting as downright censors (Wright, 2006: 554). The need for moderators arises from the perception that the total absence of regulation would give free rein to the lunatic fringe instead of promoting *bona fide* participation. Their presence contributes to turning the websites into carefully controlled and mediated communicative artifacts, from which negative comments are largely excluded. The presence of moderators combined with the introduction of social networks means that it is now possible for a campaign website to do two contradictory things, i.e. both display social networking in real-time, and control

what is said by the members of the network in real time too. Campaign websites thus function as techno-political environments.

Let us now investigate the political and social consequences of the insertion of Web 2.0 technologies on campaign sites.

### **3. Social Networks and Politics**

On Facebook, MySpace, Friendster or Ning, members display personal information such as age, gender, astrological sign, education, marital or relationship status, workplace and outside interests and activities; they often include a self-portrait as well. Although it might initially have looked as if people were going to be wary of disclosing so much information about themselves, in fact they have joined social networks in large numbers: the membership of Facebook, for instance, has now reached three hundred million,<sup>2</sup> and has grown by over two hundred and seventy percent in 2009,<sup>3</sup> while it is the third most visited site in the United States, right after the Google and Yahoo search engines.<sup>4</sup> This exponential growth in the number of people ready to post their personal details online shows that the boundaries of the private/public divide currently are unstable and in the process of being redefined. Far from deterring would-be participants, the revelation of personal details actually works towards establishing the trust necessary to social interactions and to participation in collective actions by reducing uncertainty about the intentions of others (Berger and Calabrese, 1975; Putnam, 2000; Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009). Social networks illustrate a powerful contemporary trend in popular culture: the creation of social links through self-disclosure and what can be described as distant intimacy, meaning the process of sharing highly personal stories with an unknown audience (Serfaty, 2004).

For campaigners, the large number of people embracing social networking means that politicians have to be where their potential electorate is. This is one of the reasons why they willingly submit to having their Facebook or MySpace page, giving them the same treatment as any other teenager. Social networks constitute a visual metaphor of connectedness.

Thus, during the U.S. primaries, with almost ninety thousand friends on MySpace in the spring of 2007, Hillary Clinton initially won hands down a sort of instant popularity contest with John Edwards, the other potential

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2. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>. [Accessed September 2009].

3. <http://www.istrategylabs.com/2009-facebook-demographics-and-statistics-report-276-growth-in-35-54-year-old-users/>. [Accessed September 2009].

4. <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/facebook.com>. [Accessed September 2009].

nominees of the Democratic Party, who had far fewer “friends” on social networks. However, she was rapidly overtaken by Barack Obama and his five hundred and sixty two thousand “friends” on Facebook as early as September 2007. Obama’s campaign team was obviously conversant with the social networking phenomenon and created pages on Linked-In,<sup>5</sup> on MySpace,<sup>6</sup> the latter displaying over one million eight hundred connections, and less active pages on lesser-known sites such as Gather<sup>7</sup> or MyGrite.<sup>8</sup> The Linked-In and MySpace page are still active nearly one year after the election, and the latter displays the pictures of supporters to this day. However, the Facebook page has been de-activated, and replaced by Obama’s own social network, asking people to keep on volunteering and donating to promote health care reform.<sup>9</sup> Obama can still be followed on Twitter, the micro-blogging site, where messages have to be no longer than 140 characters.<sup>10</sup> He also has his own channel on YouTube, featuring nearly nineteen hundred videos which still elicit large numbers of comments from the public.<sup>11</sup>

Other candidates in the U.S. presidential race made full use of the possibilities of Web 2.0 technologies: John Edwards thus was present on twenty-three social networks, some of which, like “revver” or “collectivex”, for instance, do not possess the notoriety of MySpace or Flickr. YouTube was also used by John Edwards to announce his decision to run for the Democratic nomination, and by Hillary Clinton to post her speeches and film clips.

On the Republican side, Mitt Romney was notable for his online presence, with an elaborate site, a page on MySpace and Facebook, and videos on YouTube. However, he pulled out of the race for the Republican nomination rather early in the game. Unlike Romney, Republican candidate John McCain fought a more traditional battle and somewhat disregarded the online arena.

In France, the two main candidates also put up elaborate campaign websites for the 2007 presidential election, using, however, different strategies. Center-right candidate and eventual winner Nicolas Sarkozy chose an almost austere interface, with no link to outside social networks, and which can still be accessed long after the election.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, in the site her campaign director put up, and which now is no longer available, Socialist candidate Ségolène

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5. <http://www.linkedin.com/in/barackobama>. [Accessed September 2009].

6. <http://www.myspace.com/barackobama>. [Accessed September 2009].

7. <http://barackobama.gather.com/>. [Accessed September 2009].

8. <http://www.mygrite.com/BarackObama/>. [Accessed September 2009].

9. <http://my.barackobama.com/page/user/login?successurl=L3BhZ2UvZGFzaGJvYXJkL3ByaXZhdGU=>. [Accessed September 2009].

10. <http://twitter.com/BarackObama>. [Accessed September 2009].

11. <http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=BarackObamadotcom#play/all>. [Accessed September 2009].

12. <http://www.sarkozy.fr/video/>. [Accessed September 2009].

Royal chose to include videos and blogs by supporters, as well as links to a popular video sharing site, Daily Motion, where excerpts from her family album showed her as a baby and as a young girl with her siblings. In other words, Royal chose to embrace the popular culture of social networking and increased transparency, showing herself in an intimate light, giving equal time to her supporters, illustrating in her very website her chief campaign motto: "France for president".<sup>13</sup> Sarkozy, on the other hand, chose the distance and pomp befitting a more traditional head of state. His self-exposure remained extremely limited, with a brief, text-only biography appearing online. By keeping aloof of the popular culture symbolized by the introduction of social networks, Sarkozy's team sought to display a clear semiotic break between his official persona and his supporters. His site thus remained within the bounds of a more traditional conception of power.

Choosing to display the pictures or the statements of supporters on an official campaign website and campaigning on social networks are both important developments, with multiple symbolic meanings. The first one has to do with one of the recurrent problems in modern democracies, the perceived apathy of voters, with low turnouts for ballots and a general lack of involvement in the civic process (Putnam, 2000). Therefore one of the purposes of campaign websites and social networks is to give people an opportunity for involvement in the political process, even if this is only done by posting a picture and a comment.

The second important issue in modern-day politics is the perception that politicians function in a world of their own, without any real contact with the people and their concerns (Champagne, 1990: 281). The pictures of very large numbers of supporters provide candidates with what ultimately amounts to a visible testimony to the existence of a grassroots base, delivering undeniable and countable proof of the legitimacy of their aspiration to power. In addition, by making their voter base accessible to the public, politicians show a willingness to submit to the test of approval or rejection by the people, even before the election itself has been held. Candidates thus show that they did not reach their position in politics through political machines or through the influence of a few, but that they have a true propinquity to their electorate.

This propinquity is reinforced by the statements supporters post on their candidate's websites, next to a picture of their own choosing, often their own. Barack Obama's MySpace page, for instance, displayed the following comments a few months after he took office:

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13. "La France présidente".

- 1) thank you mr president!!!  
my faith and confidence in our country is back up two a all time high because  
of you.  
thank you
- 2) I LOVE OBAMA ur my #1 President
- 3) woow! u are AMAZING obama! im so glad u r our president!
- 4) Obama! My main man! haha  
Im so glad your president!  
Dude, you totally rock  
♥ Kiawna
- 5) I hope you will help,us poor people,who are not making enough money to  
keep our houses,instead of going on foreclosures....Many blessings to you and  
the family....<sup>14</sup>

These words, and many others like them, contain a great deal of emotion, expressed in colloquial, everyday language, with the spelling mistakes characteristic of fast typing and, in examples 2, 3 and 4, with the spelling codes in use for texting. These examples show the supporters' process of identification with Obama's heroic figure, and the last one uses quasi-religious language to express her expectations from Obama's term in office, ending with a blessing.

The display of emotion and of identification with the candidate occurs on a regular basis, whenever part of a political website is given over to the public. The overwhelming proportion of laudatory comments is due to the presence of a moderator screening messages and eliminating disparaging ones. Such displays of positive emotions can then themselves prompt the emotions of other viewers and perhaps prompt them to get involved in the political process. In other words, campaign websites rely on the display of supporter emotion rather than solely on debate and deliberation.

It is important to underscore that the display of emotion certainly does not override more traditional forms of political expression; Sarkozy's site, with its austere look, for instance, is proof enough of the staying power of older structures. But even Sarkozy's site included videos which ultimately found their way onto the popular video sharing site YouTube and elicited passionate responses from the public. Even more blatantly, in the U.S. presidential campaign and in Royal's campaign in France, the emotion expressed online by supporters using the everyday language and spelling codes of popular culture, made a massive entry

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14. <http://www.myspace.com/barackobama>, March 26, 2009. [Accessed September 2009].

into political discourse. The expression of emotion, of passion even, was allowed to co-exist, in an apparently non-hierarchical, horizontal relationship, with the necessarily more staid and consensual rhetoric of a candidate to the highest office. In this way, political discourse can be said to be undergoing a process of hybridization with the codes of popular culture, at least whenever it migrates to an online environment.

#### **4. Popular Culture and Politics**

In order to think through the co-presence of popular culture codes with those of political rhetoric, the notions of informality and informalization can yield significant results. The concept of informality refers to “a relaxed, casual or non-ceremonial approach to conformity with formal rules, dress codes and procedures”. It is opposed to formality, which “is thought to enable the preservation of social distance and structures of power” (Misztal, 2000: 17-18).

Norbert Elias was one of the early thinkers who identified the long term trend towards the informalization of modern day society. In his view, the rise of informality is linked with that of the autonomous individual. Individualism implies that people gradually leave behind formalized and standardized behaviors in order to redefine and sometimes reconstruct themselves. This does not mean that formality or formal rules disappear. In fact, the slow but steady emergence of more flexible, less conventional modes of sociability goes together with the internalization of social constraints, and hence generates a different kind of formalization (Elias, 1987). Later thinkers have built on Elias’ groundbreaking theory to interpret changes in the private and public spheres. Anthony Giddens, for instance, has shown how individuals now self-reflexively re-create narratives of self. For him, such self-reflexivity and self-determination lead to egalitarianism in both the private and public spheres (Giddens, 1991; Tucker, 1998: 205-6). In a similar fashion, Cas Wouters argues that the process of democratization and the blurring of social and gender hierarchies that occurred throughout the twentieth century led to more flexible kinds of behavior standards as well as to a modified relationship to power and patriarchal relationships. The formal modes of address denoting respect and submission to authority figures tended to be elided and to be replaced by social and psychological rapprochement between people of different social classes and genders (Wouters, 1995 *a*, 1995 *b*, 2007). This is what Wouters calls the informalization process. Like Elias, he believes informalization does not mean the absence of constraint, but the emergence of new social constraints. To him, the new, informal behavior codes demand the expression of emotion, albeit within strictly controlled boundaries (Wouters, 1995 *b*: 335).

The informalization process and its emphasis on the expression of emotion go a long way towards explaining the successful hybridization of political rhetoric with popular culture codes. In an egalitarian society, it is indeed essential for politicians to hold a position of power and to simultaneously refrain from appearing aloof from the people who voted them to power. The semiotic break between authority figures and the people can hardly be sustained and justified any longer, even though it is a necessity for the exercise of power. In its place, at least for the duration of a political campaign, there arises a communicational situation characterized by the elision of hierarchical, top-down flows and the egalitarian co-presence of the people and prospective leaders. The infusion of popular culture into politics thus has to be seen as a manifestation of the long term trend of society towards informalization and the expression of emotion. As a result, participating in an online campaign, even if only by posting a comment, is designed to be first and foremost an emotional experience that can be shared by the largest number of people. By engaging the emotions of a wide public through the use of all available popular culture vehicles, politicians prompt a more active approach to political processes (Rojas and Puig i Abril, 2009).

## 5. Conclusion

As this study draws to its close, it has become apparent that neither disregard for the possibilities of the Internet nor the competent use of social networks guarantee an election, whether in France or in the United States, as evidenced by the election returns in both countries. However, even though the impact of campaign websites may be impossible to assess with any degree of accuracy, it may safely be argued that the alliance of popular culture with politics through the use of information technology and the Internet is here to stay because it is uniquely suited to the deep under-currents of late modern societies. As evidenced by our comparative study of campaign websites, there is no significant difference between the approaches of online campaigning of French and American politicians. In both countries, popular culture enables the mediation of political rhetoric to a vast public through the hybridization of codes and the foregrounding of emotions. With the widespread use of social networks during presidential campaigns, popular culture appears to provide a means to engage citizens in political processes and enhance the proximity of political leaders to the people. As such, it infuses political traditions with new life, thus ensuring their long-term survival.

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