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SHOWDOWN ON THE INTERNET : THE AESTHETICS OF AL GORE'S AND GEORGE W. BUSH'S CAMPAIGN 2000 SITES

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Choosing to study political websites from the point of view of aesthetics bespeaks a number of theoretical assumptions. One such assumption is that in modern discursive practices, disparate categories influence one another and sometimes even intermingle to produce a new kind of discourse, in a process of mutual interpenetration and hybridization. Such a process seems to be at play on the Internet : for the past few years, website design has been evolving into a form in its own right permeating and subtly modifying nearly all categories of discourse to be found on the Internet. Simultaneously, the horizons opened to art by the advent of the Internet have been extensively explored (Nov'Art, 1996), bringing about far-reaching changes in the formal characteristics of websites. Positing that the Internet provides a technological framework whose design possibilities shape expression and pave the way for the emergence of a specific form of political discourse, this paper therefore proposes to ascertain the structural characteristics of both Al Gore's and George W. Bush's websites in an attempt at discerning the underlying features they share, over and beyond their surface differentiation. In other words, this paper develops a structural approach which might yield the premise of an aesthetic theorization of the way Internet sites function and are perceived by viewers.

Another assumption is that, for all their claims to high seriousness, politicians are akin to artists in at least two ways : first, as people professionally concerned with their appearance and public image, they are close to the concerns of actors ; second, as people whose primary purpose, during electoral campaigns, is communication as a form of persuasion, their highly elaborate discourse shares many of the features of rhetoric and requires a deconstructionist approach, liable to lay bare the underlying assumptions of their discursive practices. It seems essential, therefore, to inquire into the way politicians set the stage for both their discourse and their image and to attempt to make out how their discourse relates to both narrative and theatricality, within the specific framework provided by Internet technology.

The data serving as a basis for this research were collected over a two-month-period, starting in September 2000 and ending on November 7, 2000, election day. Screenshots were used to copy a large number of pages on the official Al Gore and George W. Bush sites, resulting in a representative sample of the features displayed on each site. Yet, encompassing as it does both structural and content analysis, the scope of this paper had to be restricted to only two major elements so as to try and control the overabundance of material : on the one hand, each website's frontpage, i.e., the page opening each site and affording access to all other layers of content, because it functions as a showcase for the whole site ; and on the other hand, each candidate's biography as it appears online. The first set of data will serve as the basis for structural analysis, while the second will be submitted to content analysis.

The Frontpage : A Startling Similarity in Lay-out

In both Gore's and Bush's sites (fig. 1 and 2), the frontpage is divided in three vertically. On the left hand side a picture of the Bush-Cheney ticket or of the Gore-Lieberman ticket can be found. Either scroll-down menus or hypertext links give access to the biographies of the candidates and to that of their wives. Above the candidates' pictures, a link refers the viewer to the Spanish, text-only version of the site. Just below the pictures of the candidates, hypertext links give access to information about the campaign and to policy positions. They also feature calls to action, volunteer work and financial contributions. On George W. Bush's site, the

Republican Party's site in each state can be reached after selecting a state. Just below this link, one can click on the George W. Bush online store link to buy campaign items, clothes, bottled water and other partisan paraphernalia.

In Al Gore's case, the hypertext links are similar in content, although the lay-out of each one of the three sections is different. While the Bush menu is made of plain white letters on a black background, the Gore menu is more elaborate and mixes a miniature map of the US with a variety of icons and drop-down menus, thus presenting a greater proportion of graphics over text. The calls to action in each state come first and are followed with a variety of suggestions all aiming at involving the viewer : there is an invitation to join a chat, send comments to the team, make a donation or make Gore's site the default opening page on one's computer.

The center parts of each page also display very similar features : the information is mostly text-based and focuses on news and political statements. The central section tends to change daily and to reflect the political agenda of each candidate. The link to the section in Spanish is in the central section for Al Gore's site, making it as prominent as it is in his adversary's site. In both candidates' sites, the background is white, the lettering is plain black in the central section : this is where the informational purpose is the clearest and this is reflected by the sobriety and sometimes even the stark simplicity of the lay-out.

On the right-hand side of the page, Real Audio and Real Video versions of the candidates' speeches can be downloaded. Both candidates include a photo gallery, a trivia section with a daily quiz allowing people to win baseball caps or T-shirts, a toolbox section where free software such as Netnanny or RealPlayer can be downloaded. In George W. Bush's site, the bottom of the page features two original items, the tax calculator and the e-train. The tax calculator of course reflects a major element of the Bush platform, whose main plank is tax cuts, while the e-train, with the White House as its final destination, graphically reminds viewers that even a single vote "can make the difference". In both sites, viewers can enter their e-mail and get a newsletter from Gore, "special offers, giveaways and information updates" from Bush.

Four Structural Features

The similarities found in the two candidates' sites may be due in part to the technical requirements of the medium itself and in part to the close monitoring of political adversaries which is one of the hallmarks of any electoral campaign. Political rivalry is thus turned into an ongoing dialogic contest, perhaps accounting for the fact that the candidates' sites indeed go further than surface similarities and share four structural features. They are fragmentation, accumulation, movement and playfulness.

Fragmentation

Even though each page is divided into three main parts, each part is then sub-divided into a multitude of headings, links, suggestions, offers etc... The page may be said to reproduce the layout of a traditional print newspaper, where every single article is fragmentary, being continued in the inner sections of the paper, and only the editorial is available as a single piece (although this is sometimes found on the back page). Much like newsprint, the fragmentary nature of the frontpage therefore probably aims at arousing curiosity by only offering tidbits and thus enticing the viewer to click. Its function is chiefly one of teasing.

In this case, we can also perceive remnants of the way newspapers tend to organize their subject matter, deliberately juxtaposing heterogeneous elements side by side. However, unlike newsprint, the heterogeneity of the homepage concerns both the use of space and the use of time. Space is indeed fragmented into a considerable number of sub-spaces, each one putting forward its own message, as we shall see in the next section. However the frontpage is also fragmented along temporal lines, since it offers an insight into the way the campaign unfolds over time, into the candidates' biographies from their early years up to the present day. Viewers have to make sense of the spatial and temporal fragmentation of the frontpage and construct its meaning out of the various pieces they are presented with ; they have to coalesce them back into a narrative transcending their surface fragmentation to form a consistent whole. Thus the device of fragmentation can be said to be, like e-mail and chat rooms, a means of involving the viewer into the construction of political meaning and hence, into the political process.

Spatial and temporal fragmentation may also be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the contemporary fragmentation of general politics into issues-oriented politics, in which a large variety of interest groups and advocacy groups compete in order to get their agenda onto the political scene. Thus the lay-out of the page is a graphical rendition of the situation prevailing in the realm of politics, with each politician trying to address as many separate issues as possible so as to appeal to as many categories of the population as possible.

Finally, fragmentation functions as an indicator of accumulation of content : the frontpage could have been much more sober, with less than half-a-dozen categories which would then have led to detailed chapters. Instead, both candidates chose to display outright links to as much content as possible. Hypertext links underscore heterogeneity and also produce discontinuity, inasmuch as they allow the reader to move randomly

from link to link, without imposing any kind of order on the process of perusal of the document (Serfaty, 1999, p. 61). Complexity is thus one of the paradoxical by-products of fragmentation and it is only compounded by the next structural feature, i.e., accumulation.

Accumulation

Serious informational content appears most obviously in the central section of the page and is framed by a variety of items on the right-hand and left-hand sides, thus offering a huge mix of informational, activist and recreational items. Such a strategy of accumulation probably also has something to do with a desire to use to the full the technological capabilities of the Internet. Unlike posters which, once on the hoardings, remain unchanged except for becoming everyday more weather-beaten, the sites are updated daily and sometimes even hourly. In addition, a poster has to rely on a single picture and a short caption, sometimes even a single word, if it is to be read by passers-by or by motorists. A TV ad is also subject to the iron rule of conciseness, with campaign managers constantly looking for the 25-second soundbite that will stick in the memory of viewers. By contrast, Internet makes exhaustivity possible. Information can be presented in printed form, in audio form or in video form. Very often, all three formats are proposed to the surfer for a single document, such as a speech at a rally. In addition, accumulation is sought because it offers the possibility of fully describing the candidates' positions on all the issues of their campaign. Each candidate's manifesto becomes fully accessible.

This is precisely what Roland Barthes described as "a real informational polyphony" and a "density of signs" (Elam, 1980, p. 19). Although Barthes used these analyses while describing the way the theater functioned, they seem particularly appropriate to the context of the candidates' homepages. The viewer must perceive and make sense of diverse data provided through diverse media (print, photographs, videos, audio), in an ongoing process of interpretation. Yet, no matter how dissimilar the sources may be, each piece of information bolsters every other piece and conveys mutually reinforcing information. Accumulation thus creates "semiotic thickness" (Elam, 1980, p. 45) : signs are piled upon signs and their very multiplicity is conducive to the production of meaning.

Accumulation of information both departs from traditional campaign literature, because of its use of audio and video formats, and reproduces the most traditional political pamphlets, which are simply transcribed on the Net – albeit in full form. In so doing, the Net reproduces and reinterprets the drive for inclusiveness which characterized the encyclopaedic movement (Ghitalla, 1999). It is in fact with television that the contrast is starkest : the full statements of goals and policies available on the candidates' websites could never have been accommodated by the rigid formatting of TV programs and their relentless pursuit of entertainment. The accumulation of political information made possible by the Internet thus revives older, more traditional forms of political communication, while at the same time transforming them beyond recognition, partly because of the next identified feature, i.e., movement.

Movement

Although the main parts of the sites are basically stable, the text in the center part of each page changes daily ; part of the links are also moved around the page. The quiz also changes daily. The discontinuity in the center part reflects the ebb and flow of the candidates' campaigns and hints, by contrast, at the solidity and stability of the main planks in their platforms, inasmuch as the links to their political action programs are never altered. The Internet site also affords potential voters access to an archive of TV or rally speeches which used to be essentially ephemeral before the advent of the Internet. Thus movement is dialectically related to the stability of other items, and constitutes a metaphoric representation of political action, which synthesizes three distinct time scales : political action indeed refers at the same time to present, day-to-day action, to the past of the country, with references to the Founding Fathers and the early days of the Republic and to the future with invocations of change or progress and the need to manage the future (Balandier, 1992, p. 26). Movement thus affects both the spatial and the temporal representation of each politician's record and program.

Ceaseless movement is also a way for candidates to thump away their message and encourage potential voters to take specific actions. The Gore site especially emphasizes this sort of communication, encouraging fellow Democrats, among other things, to "get 10 neighbours to vote" and reinforces it with the e-mailed message. Moving information around, keeping up the viewer's interest : this is of course what any medium has to do. The point is that this is done in a context of political mobilization, where the calls to actions such as fund-raising, canvassing or otherwise getting involved are now directed at everyone, not just at official supporters of the candidates during rallies or political meetings. The websites are thus yet another means of increasing the variety of the supply of political information as well as of diversifying its potential targets.

Perpetual movement in fact reinforces the effects of accumulation of information. It keeps viewers on their toes and makes them aware of the need to connect frequently to the candidates' sites in order to keep up with current campaign events. The expectation of movement or of change stretches and reconfigures the

viewer's perception of the websites : an infrequently updated website actually seems to be poor in content, while merely moving items of information about the site draws attention to them and helps redefine their relation to their context. Movement thus must be interpreted as an additional means of producing meaning : movement is in and of itself a communication tool as well as a metaphor for political action.

Playfulness

The playful element is present in the sites' online stores, where goods are advertised with all the gusto of hawkers at market. In addition, both sites have a section devoted to kids and to families. The gay colors, the drawings all inject a playful element in the seriousness of the site (fig.3). Of course we are not meant to believe that the toddlers depicted in this page are the actual targets of the text. But the pretence in itself creates a sense of fun and of closeness with the electorate (as the children are those of, if not anonymous, at least unknown supporters). This contributes to lighten the general mood of the site and further enhances the basically mixed nature of the items it features : highly serious elements are close to informal ones or, as we shall see, to downright irreverent ones. As a result, the candidate's discourse veers towards informality, as evidenced by the calls to action directed at voters, in highly conversational style. The Internet thus reflects and reinforces a basic component of modern political discourse : formal discourse keeps losing ground, informal discourse is increasingly gaining momentum.

In Al Gore's case, the playful element is brought much further by the introduction of a colorful satire of Bush's views on Social Security. In a style reminiscent of the cartoons and of the ads of the fifties, Bush is shown as about to tear up this venerable public institution : a smiling man with a strong likeness to a character in an ad literally holds George W. Bush up for ridicule. Exactly as in parlour games, the viewer may choose four different options by clicking on Social Security cards. Each click opens a pop-up frame countering each one of Bush's claims. Here the playful element develops into theatricality : this page uses the technique of the play within a play to send up George W. Bush's pronouncements, as shown by the extensive use of dialogue and the repetition of the phrase " of course it does ", a quotation from one of George W. Bush's interviews which turns up regularly : this reminds us of the comic chorus which can be found in classical plays (fig. 4).

The introduction of theatricality functions in three major ways. In the first place, theatrical discourse here, because it belongs to the parodic mode, " has a twofold direction – it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another's discourse*, toward *someone else's speech* " (Rose, 1993, p. 126, emphasis in the text). In other words, theatrical discourse ushers in a fictional agonistic contest between the two candidates, thus enabling them to assume the roles of villain and hero, albeit symbolically. In addition, this level of discourse allows Gore to come across as an expert on this particular subject, dismissing effectively and authoritatively his opponent's views : the fictional context, as opposed to the pre-eminently informational content of the site as a whole, makes it possible both to include the other person's words and distance oneself from them. Embedding the adversary's words into one's own text again refers to the polyphony we identified earlier as belonging to one of the structural features of the sites, i.e. accumulation. Polyphony is further re-affirmed here, thus lending more depth and density to the site's contents (figure 5).

Finally, the short theatrical interlude is supposed to make viewers laugh thanks to comic repetition, to subtle warping of the opponent's message and thanks to caricature. The resulting laughter, ideally shared by candidate and audience, creates a sense of complicity between the jokester and the viewer. In the case of Al Gore's Internet site, this bid for complicity indeed seems to originate in the candidate himself. Despite the seemingly rational discourse carefully debunking his opponent's views on a highly serious, essential subject, what is really at play is definitely not an intellectual act, but a social one, whose major purpose is " the integration of society " (Frye, 1971, p. 43). Shared laughter becomes a rallying symbol, thanks to which viewers can identify with the candidate on the one hand, but also be reassured as to their own image : shared laughter assures viewers that they belong in the candidate's cultural, social and ideological environment. This brief theatrical interlude therefore plays an important part in summoning and consolidating a sense of political community.

The parodic mode evinced by these pop-ups is of course nothing new to politics ; but in more traditional media, there is a clear " social division of work ", to borrow Durkheim's famous phrase. Serious debates and issues are the stuff of politicians' discourses, while political satires, parodies or other comic forms are taken up by cartoonists, comedians or talk show hosts and are supposed to be out of key in mainstream political discourse. In this case, however, the official site of the candidate, though only providing a link to another site named " OfCourseItDoes.com " and thus ostensibly keeping at a distance from it, in fact embraces parody, stages it and therefore turns it into a legitimate aspect of official political discourse. The parodic mode thus reinforces the overall move towards informality while simultaneously attempting to close the gap between " high and popular " political discourse by emphasizing the latter (Rose, 1993, p. 214).

The candidates' biographies

Biographies represent an essential, carefully designed aspect of each politician's communication. This is the place where their image can be composed at leisure, this is where they can attempt to create an idealized reconstruction of the events leading up to the time of their running for office. Therefore it is hardly any wonder that both Al Gore's and George W. Bush's sites feature a biography. Unlike the frontpages of their websites, however, the two candidates' biographies stand in sharp contrast to each other.

Al Gore's biography

The most striking characteristic in Al Gore's biography is a clear timeline ; each period of his life is defined and given a general name : while 'the early years' take up only one screen, 'the army years' continue for four screens ; then come 'the growing years', where the text mixes information about his graduate studies, about the birth of his first child and, most importantly, about the way in which his work as a reporter helped expose a bribery case ; the next three periods are named after his political career : the 'congressional years' take up nine screens, two screens are devoted to 'the senate years' while no fewer than thirteen screens retrace 'the vice-presidential years'.

The second chief characteristic of Al Gore's biography is the pre-eminence of text over pictures. Although there is a different picture in each screen, the text plays an all-important explanatory role, as we shall see later on. But text also means that the viewer has to follow the order imposed by the linearity inherent to writing : because writing is a medium where letters, words, lines, paragraphs are consecutively arraigned, deciphering text in a linear fashion is the only means of making sense of it (Serfaty, 1999, p. 59). However, this structural characteristic tends to overflow into interpretation : the limited number of pictures, the necessity of reading the accompanying text is thus also conducive to viewing the candidate's life as an ordered whole, with a discernible pattern.

The third chief characteristic is that the bottom of the screen gives access to the biographies of Al and Tipper Gore and to those of Joe and Hadassah Lieberman. The full ticket thus quite literally and graphically supports the campaign and its various issues. In other words, as in any official portrait of a king or a statesman, the use of space predictably has symbolic connotations : the positioning of the links reproduces and strengthens the structure of power within the Democratic Party : providing full accounts of the vice-presidential candidate's career thus constitutes a gesture of inclusion and sharing, highlighting team-spirit. This aspect is, surprisingly, virtually absent from George W. Bush's site, where Dick Cheney's biography is reduced to a single page of stark, black-and-white text, as if the information provided was inversely proportional to the man's very real power and accomplishments.

The first point to emerge from the analysis of Al Gore's biography is that a precise, definite narrative is being devised. The idealized hardworking childhood (fig.6) on a farm is more than merely hinted at : it is given programmatic value, because it can create a sort of romance, with the little boy already displaying the qualities of endurance and courage that are the stuff of heroes. It is also important to point out that the text next to the picture merely mentions the fact that his father "worked" in Washington, completely passing over the fact that he was a senator. We may legitimately wonder why. Two reasons emerge : one is that Gore wished to downplay what could be interpreted as his belonging, like George W. Bush, to a political dynasty ; the other is that he stands on his own at the beginning of his own story, in true hero fashion (Frye, 1971, p. 41).

The sequencing of his life and works into clearly defined periods, while providing narrative continuity, enhances the heroic stature of the presidential candidate : sequencing creates an order, a recognizable, identifiable progression towards the ultimate goal of the highest office. The few pictures which are provided to illustrate each stage in Gore's progress interact with each other and form a symbolic system referring us back to our expectations of what a leader's life should be like. The abundant texts in each section also interact with the pictures to set up and reinforce narrativity : the two kinds of discourses – pictures and text – have to be seen as merging into and modifying each other. Thus, the long, descriptive texts lead us to consider the otherwise essentially mute pictures as evidence of all the qualities needed to earn the name of statesman. In so doing, the pictures and the texts coalesce to assert the legitimacy of the candidate and of his claims to the votes of the people : they amount to an exercise in hero-making.

Two pictures more particularly attempt to bring out Gore's legitimacy : in figure 7, he is shown in a slightly stooping position, shaking hands with a seated man. The social setting is merely suggested, but it seems to be a typical American scene and this is the first time a background has appeared in any of the photographs. It could be any drugstore anywhere in the country, with a man sitting next to the vending machine and a car, whose outline can be made out outside the window. This very ordinariness turns the drugstore into a location representative of the country and of the people as a whole. The man whom Gore is greeting is also eminently ordinary. He remains seated and the candidate seems to bow to him in an almost deferential attitude, very similar to Gore's attitude in the picture showing him with the children of anonymous supporters. By contrast, the photograph of Gore taking the oath of office is far more typical of the pictures illustrating Gore's biography (fig.

8). With its display of solemnity and high seriousness, it emphasizes statesmanship and quite literally, stature, since Gore seems to stand taller than anyone else. In other words, the pictures shown in the biographical section go back and forth between ordinariness and heroic exemplarity, between visions of a man close to the people and visions of a man devoted to serving the people and, because of his heroic qualities, fully deserving to be elected to the highest office. Gore's web biography seeks to transfigure him into a larger-than-life hero, into a great man of more than ordinary achievement and as such, it foregrounds "social differentiation and more particularly the gap between the common man and the leader" (Balandier, 1992, p. 26, my translation).

Bush's biography

In sharp contrast with what can be observed in the depiction of Al Gore's progress, George W. Bush's biography does not divide his life into periods, but lumps everything under the heading "1946-present". It is not even described as a biography but as a "photo album", yet it fulfills precisely the same goals of image formation. Strikingly enough, the text to picture ratio is in sharp contrast for the two candidates, with Gore's biography relying heavily on text while Bush's biography relies primarily on pictures. George W. Bush's record of professional activities can be found both in the "1946-present" section and in the "accomplishments" section.

Another important difference is that George W. Bush's filiation is emphasized: two pictures show him as a baby in his father's arms and this will later be echoed by a picture of the Republican candidate holding his two infant daughters in his arms, thus further reinforcing the conception of George W. Bush as an heir following in his father's footsteps and carrying on a family tradition (fig. 9 and 10). In fact, while Gore's childhood was made short shrift of in a single screen and a single picture, no fewer than three screens and six different pictures, including a close-up of Bush as a baby, illustrate the Republican candidate's early years.

The picture chosen to illustrate his university years is one of a baseball game. The text describes the degrees he earned at Yale and later on at Harvard without showing the commencement ceremonies at either university. This is followed by his army years. Then the album goes back to his family life with his wedding, the birth of his twin daughters, and then a group portrait showing them a few years later. Two pictures illustrate George W. Bush's stint in the oil business. This is followed by a picture of the then-Governor in the company of baseball star Nolan Ryan. Then the biographical sequence ends with "family fishing", depicting Bush in his father's company.

George W. Bush's online biography evinces a number of highly interesting features. Although the general purpose for Bush as for Gore is to create a story-line, to romanticize the events of their lives so as to shape them into uplifting tales, the forms used are different and end up in the creation of different meanings. George W. Bush's photo album borrows from the long-established form of the family memento, a photo album starting with birth and highlighting landmark events. The transition from black and white photographs to color photographs on the site is also reminiscent of the familiar experience of leafing through the yellowing pages of family albums, suggesting that George W. Bush is presented as if he were a member of the family, of everybody's family. This is further evidenced by the stress laid on his parents and their pride upon their son's birth. All of George W. Bush's siblings are mentioned by name, up to and including a child who died in infancy and an as yet unborn child. In the section devoted to George W. Bush's wedding, he is quoted as saying that proposing to Laura was "the best decision [he] ever made". In other words, stress falls more heavily on his life, on domesticity and on the family romance than it does on the candidate's work, which somehow seems to take second place. What all this amounts to is that private life is drummed up to be the defining feature of this highly public man. The narrative created here is that of a man of the people, for whom family and domestic bliss are life's primary focus: the Republican candidate's idealized private life is thus made into a political argument, encouraging the viewer to identify with him. In the process, the boundaries between public and private life blur and the move towards informality in political discourse is thereby reinforced.

George W. Bush's identification with the common man further appears in the two pictures of him talking to oil field workers during his stint in the oil business (fig. 11): the industrial background is highly visible, the workers appear to be on an equal footing with him, and in one case, he is actually below the worker: once more, the use of space possesses highly symbolic connotations and, in the various pictures included in the online biography, tends to emphasize belonging, love of family and country, love of sports, entrepreneurial spirit, all of which amount to turning George W. Bush into a folk hero. His individuality is downplayed while his life is weaved into a collective myth enabling the bonding of the community.

Unlike Al Gore, whose biography tended towards the heroic and the statesmanlike and accordingly de-emphasized his filiation, George W. Bush's biography prominently underscores his similarities to the common man while at the same time underscoring his relationship with his father. Predictably, the fact that his father was President of the United States is never mentioned, as a means of enhancing identification for as many viewers as possible. Needless to say, both Gore's and Bush's online biographies are utterly fictionalized, relentlessly edited versions of their lives, having more to do with cultural constructions than with the accurate rendering of self. As

such, they point to an important aspect of political communication : the creation of narratives liable to engage the emotions of potential voters and thus to produce political communities.

Conclusion

The Republican and Democratic campaign websites use information technology to diversify their offer of information and their mobilization techniques, without doing away with more traditional forms of political communication which indeed are still the centerpiece of campaigning. Yet, the two official Internet sites we have been examining point to the gradual emergence of a specific form, characterized by a mixture of pictures, text and sound and strategies of fragmentation, accumulation, movement and playfulness. These structural features reinforce the long-term tendency of political discourse to become ever more informal – a structural evolution pointing to the perceived need of renovating political communication, removing it from the realm of authoritative, rigidly regulated discourse which placed it apart from and above the people to make it more accessible and purportedly less conventional. The move towards informality of political discourse is linked to another tendency of modern political communication, the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private person. Although the tradition of offering the public an account of the lives of public figures dates back at least to Plutarch's *Lives*, the tradition meant covering their great deeds and memorable sayings while leaving aside any kind of personal detail. To a large extent, this is still the case for Al Gore, whose biography takes second place to his accomplishments as a professional politician. George W. Bush's website operates on a different level : by giving him a chance to present a fully-fledged version both of his platforms and of his biography in a single place, the website create a symbolic and aesthetic system which further blurs the already shaky boundaries between private and public lives. In so doing, online political communication turns private life into a political statement liable to help or hamper the candidate's political career, thus suggesting the emergence of a new form of political stage-setting.

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Internet Sites

While Al Gore's and George W. Bush's campaign sites are no longer available online, they can still be accessed thanks to the archive set up by the company www.alexa.com and the Library of Congress at the following URL : <http://web.archive.org/collections/e2k.html>