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AMANDA C. R. CLARK

A *Type* of Communication: What to watch for in U.S. Presidential Campaign Promotional Ephemera & Typographic Choices

Facets of graphic design, logo design, typefaces, and other images absorbed through rapid cognition have a psychological effect on the viewer. Well known to advertisers, these stylistic typographic choices transmit a powerful message to viewers and influence their impressions of the product (Coleman and Wasike 2003: 1). Visual design decisions may persuade at unquestioned and unconscious levels, and they may be indelibly imbued with their historical identity. How then do these choices, when applied to the promotional materials of political campaigns, affect the stylistic impressions made by printed materials, such as posters, bumper stickers, lawn signs, and buttons? By examining this category of political ephemera, do we find that Republican campaigns tend to use bold, all caps, sans serif fonts more frequently, while Democratic campaigns prefer more slender, serif fonts? Moreover, what messages do these choices convey to the viewer? The following article explores these graphic decisions and their implications when employed in the aesthetic construction of U.S. presidential campaigns.

Typography: The Power of Font

Prior to the early 19th century, typefaces were primarily serif, often called "Roman" fonts, meaning that the ends of the stems of letters included a small ornate projection. This

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may have originated from stone-carving traditions, with the carving of the letters based on the hand-written form of the language,[1] then carried into printed matter from developments prior to the printing press (Baines and Haslam 2005: 207). Thus, the serif font carries with it the traditions of Roman alphabet written language, the flourishes of the age of Baroque, Rococo, and pre-Enlightenment. A sans serif typeface, without the stem flourish, was consistently used first in 1816 and became officially recognized by typographers as a font in England in the 1830s (Kinross 2004: 38). In its early years, the sans serif printed font was associated with classical antiquity and ancient Egypt. Often called "Egyptian," this early category of sans serif was heavy in mass. "Egyptian" is technically categorized as a slab serif, and while it still has serif-like appendages on its letters, the letterforms are chunky and block-like, a clear forerunner of the refined sans serifs that would come later (Baines and Haslam 2005: 70). Similar in appearance were the German sans serifs of the early 19th century, called "Grotesk" typefaces. While early designers' names remained anonymous, as the Industrial Revolution progressed, and then later into the early 20th century, sans serifs would carry trade names and designer names, and would come to be standardized (Kinross 2004: 38).

These sans serifs evoked an idealized classical era as observed at the time of the 19th century — a continuation of the Neoclassical era when the arts romanticized and sought to memorialize antiquity for forward-looking aesthetic guidance — ironically as symbolic of modernity and progress (Kinross 2004: 38). While it may seem contradictory to consider a classical aesthetic as progressive, at the time it was envisioned in stark contrast to the Middle Ages (Eisenstein, 2005: 123-126; see also Eisenstein 2005: Chapter 5, "The Permanent Renaissance, Mutation of a Classical Revival"). As printing presses grew in physical size, so too did the public notices that were produced by them. The sans serif typeface likewise thickened, becoming bolder. German-language typographers excelled in refining the sans serif type, reveling in the interplay of tradition and modern aesthetics. The symbolic modern identity of the sans serif font was preferred greatly after the German

Revolution of 1918-1919, becoming interwoven with a new national identity and modern philosophy (Kinross 2004: 91).

Typeface has thus been historically politicized. In Germany, Blackletter type bore a patina of German nationalism, having been derived from contemporary calligraphy at the time of Gutenberg; it was praised in the 1930s and 1940s by the Nazi party. Early 20th-century German fonts grew increasingly simplified (Kinross 2004: 91). Blackletter-derivatives were criticized—especially in English-language countries—as being too ornate, making it difficult to distinguish between letterforms and thus an impediment to recognition.

The Classical Revival style, continuing since the Enlightenment era, sought the ideal of austere noble simplicity in morally virtuous, refined serif fonts. Special attention was placed on the spacing of the letters, preferring them to be optically equal, not literally equal by linear measurement, and the complexity of the font was gradually minimized (Kinross 2004: 92). In the 20th century, this was spurned by those modernists who preferred the "universal" and more formally pure sans serif fonts.[2] While the Blackletter typeface was championed by the Nazi regime as a national script, new types such as Futura, designed by Paul Renner—who subsequently faced persecution by the Nazis—were heralded by the artists of the day.[3] It is interesting to note that during this era in Europe, graphic design, logos, and typefaces particularly were experiencing unprecedented levels of attention by the artistic and commercial communities, and that they were increasingly associated with particular political parties. At this time, Germany was a leader in print culture, especially in the development of the sans serif font that would become so internationally popular and function as a metonym for national polity.[4]

After World War II the ideal of modernism came to fruition. Sans serif fonts, with their formerly perceived socialist tendencies, blossomed in an era that promoted the ideal of

"progress." (Kinross 2004: 158). A consideration of German fonts is crucial to the history of recent typographic developments. In part this is because German graphic design history and modern art history in general so greatly influenced American artists, but also because the American history of the Linotype machine is so expressly bound with its German heritage. An American German immigrant had developed Linotype for faster publishing needs, and the early machines themselves were produced in Germany. This machine revolutionized printing (especially newspaper production in America) and typography in the late 19th-century, and brings us to our understanding of print today (Loxley 2004: 58). In short, the history of typography in the United States must be considered in terms of its German influence.

The Helvetica typeface is particularly prominent as a post-war font, and is today one of the most widely used typefaces worldwide. Designed in 1957 in the Haas Type foundry in German-speaking Switzerland, it replaced the popular German sans serif font of the 1890s, Akzidenz Grotesk (Loxley 2004: 173). Helvetica represented all that was new and modern in the age of progress, and its fresh aesthetic suggested political and intellectual youth.[5] It unhesitatingly shirked the past and exploited the beauty of the machine, rejecting that which was organically human. As it developed and exploded in use (representing logos from American Airlines to the Staples office supply store), it has incurred a tremendous amount of commentary—some worship it as the symbol of pure modernism, others see it as the font of modern warfare (Loxley 2004: 174), or, as explored in the 2007 film *Helvetica,* some see it as a symbolic form of typographic apathy.

Font choices communicate a panoply of information, affecting emotions, perceived meaning, and political emergence from the classical past, all mired in tradition. In current research, bold, italicized, and sans serif typefaces have been shown to strain the eyes of the reader if read for prolonged periods; conversely, they function well to draw and/or hold attention, to serve as textual markers, or provide emphasis (Tannenbaum et al. 1964: 65-73;

see also Tinker 1963). Further, something as seemingly simple as the choice of typeface is meaningfully manifest in the realm of printed material in U.S. presidential campaigns. The history of typeface has profoundly inserted itself into the history of American politics.

Ubiquitous Semiotics: Typography and Campaign Ephemera

Campaign scholars have long lamented the lack of research regarding the implications of visual messages, such as font choice within the graphic elements of campaign propaganda design (Coleman and Wasike 2003: 1-2). While journalists are taught to use the "persuasive power" of visual imagery and layout design, these decisions still need to be considered vis-à-vis presidential campaigns to better understand the impression made upon the intended audience (Stein 2001: 249). While most visual studies of political campaigns are directed at photography and television commercials, campaign ephemera remains lamentably unexamined.[6] Ephemera, generally printed materials, are items intended to be used only for short periods of time in terms of popularity or usefulness, but because of this they often become part of a genre of valued memorabilia acquired by libraries and collectors alike. Campaign bumper stickers and lawn signs, among other items, fall within this category. Graphic design scholarship has argued convincingly that viewers use graphics to help them successfully interpret communication messages, and that the expert use of graphic choices (including typeface) can dramatically improve the recognition of content (see Pasternack and Utt 1990; Griffin and Stevenson 1992).

When Roberta Rosenburg wrote her essay, "All Fonts are Political — What do Font Choices Say About the Candidates?" (Rosenberg 2008: n.p.), Rudy Giuliani and John Edwards had already withdrawn from the 2008 presidential race; at that point the contenders consisted of Hillary Clinton, Mike Huckabee, John McCain, Barack Obama,

and Mitt Romney. Thus, professional copywriter Roberta Rosenburg focused on these five candidates' campaign materials. Like Rosenburg, I am curious regarding how, and what, font choices made for ephemeral materials within presidential campaigns have communicated meaning to, or swayed opinion of, the voting audience. The public's campaign choices have arguably been at times based on unconscious or unconsidered decisions that are influenced by media presentation. Bumper stickers and lawn signs are ubiquitous during a campaign; certainly their layout, font, and color choices affect at some level those who see them again and again.[7] Rosenberg's article was in response to a January 2008 *Boston Globe* piece of similar interest by graphic designers Sam Berlow and Cyrus Highsmith, titled, "What Font Says 'Change'? Type Designers Decode the Presidential Candidates" (Berlow and Highsmith 2008: n.p.). In this commentary, the authors discuss how typography has helped define the image of a product, company, or individual — the concept known by the hackneyed term, "brand." Just as a font on a wine label communicates something about the bottle's contents, so too does the font used for the name of a "big-box" store, and even the political candidate identified on a bumper sticker (Berlow and Highsmith 2008: n.p.).

While Berlow and Highsmith looked at all the candidates in the race at an early date, I limit my consideration here to those candidates who received a minimum of one percent of the total popular vote. This more narrow consideration limits the otherwise vast amount of material. My research indicates that, as candidates become more serious and especially after their running-mate is chosen, they tend to refine and make more conservative their font selections. However, during the Obama and McCain campaigns, their January 2008 materials underwent little if any typographic modification throughout the course of the remaining race.

Milton Glaser, designer of the iconic "I ♥ NY" logo, has suggested that the graphic design community takes an overall Democratic position (Pedersen 2004: n.p.); keeping this in mind, Berlow and Highsmith defined the Obama campaign fonts as: serifs that were

sharp and pointed, “clean pen strokes [that] evoke a well-pressed Armani suit;” when sans serifs are employed they are reminiscent of “Nike or Sony,” and they assessed the overall typographic selection as “young and cool.” They also considered Obama’s rising sun logo as evoking the “feeling of a hot new Internet company” (Berlow and Highsmith 2008: n.p.). I will not, because of the limited scope of this article, be able to fully entertain considerations of logo design. It would make an excellent follow-up study to investigate the prevalent stars and stripes and the recent rising sun motif in campaign material.

Berlow and Highsmith assessed the McCain campaign typeface as a “perfect compromise between sans and a serif” font — what is often called “flared sans,” because is it neither strictly sans serif nor serif, but in-between (Berlow and Highsmith 2008: n.p.). At first glance, the flared sans appears to be sans serif. While the strokes have thick and thin variations, the stems lack the expected serifs. It is as if the stroke has the intention of being a serif without the realization of it. Berlow and Highsmith find the overall appearance to be similar to “a high-end real estate company;” furthermore, the McCain selections preferred blue tones to red and employed wide, even spacing (Berlow and Highsmith 2008: n.p.). The authors prophetically predicted, based on typography and design, that Obama and McCain would go the farthest in their campaigns.[8]

But how efficacious (and/or intentional) are the font choices used in campaign materials? A comment by copywriter Dean Rieck posted on Rosenburg’s online article provides a counterpoint for her (and my) belief in the significance of font choices:

> This is fascinating. But I doubt the candidates put as much thought into their type as the author of that article. Fonts do have personalities, but 99 percent of fonts are chosen at random. The only people selecting fonts with great care are those designing logos for large corporations.

> I do some political work here in Ohio, and I can tell you that most things connected to politics is utterly chaotic and screwy. They're lucky to just get their signs printed. (Rosenberg 2008: n.p.)

The accuracy of the commentator's statistics is secondary to the general tone and perspective in the quote. Rieck proposes that it is the author of the article, not political campaign graphic designers, who read meaning into such font choices. He goes on to suggest that "real" scrutiny of font selection occurs primarily within major design corporations and graphic design professionals. While we may be more easily and effectively swayed by the emotional charge of a well-crafted commercial or campaign video, the viewing audience cannot help but be affected by the message accompanying the inundation of ubiquitous campaign ephemera, and even more so through the fonts those messages use to convey power. This form of subtle persuasion is known within campaign advertising as accidental suasion, a form of "unintentional propaganda" (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 2004: 150). The color, font, and layout choices of these ephemeral promotional tools carry a message to the viewer that is ingested even when it is not consciously considered (Schwartzman 1988: 190). The aesthetic cues inherent in typefaces can be politicized when those aesthetic cues evoke the ideological imagination.

A Font of Predictions: A Closer Look

As an example, let us consider the quintessential face-off between a Democratic and Republican choice of typography: the 2004 presidential election (see illustrations). Over the course of his two terms, the name of George W. Bush became synonymous with the bold, all caps, sans serif font that the public was accustomed to seeing on stickers, signs and similar ephemera. Unlike other candidates, this iconic use of the bold, all caps, sans serif font went virtually unchanged throughout his campaign. I would posit that it largely

redefined how campaign fonts are selected and then retained as a form of presidential product branding (see also Klein 2002: 63-65.). This particular election offers a clear-cut example of the early 21st-century Republican versus Democrat use of typographic communications.

Considering first the "Kerry Edwards: A Stronger America" image (see Figure 2), we see that "Kerry" is in Times-style font (such as Times New Roman, Raanana, or Mshtaken). It is bolded, with tight character spacing (around -5%), and has slightly elongated letters. There is no curve to the strokes on the K in Kerry, and the serifs are nicely rounded, if a little drooping. The letter construction is continuous, not broken, the shape is common to Roman serif fonts with a slendering at the curves and thickening in the straight areas. Unique to "Kerry Edwards: A Stronger America" is the somewhat narrower medium width of the typeface. The modeling of the letters shows a high (but not exaggerated) contrast of thick to thin, with a gradual transition between them, and a rigid vertical axis (Figure 2) (Baines and Haslam 2005: 54-55). In short, it is a reserved choice, a font familiar to the public, commonly used as a default font setting in mainstream word-processing software. While it is a far cry from the historical German Blackletter, is it likewise quite distant from the revolutionary socialist fonts of the early- and mid-20th century; and, it harkens to an imagined past, a kind of typographic nostalgia for fonts that would eventually give birth to this genre of humanistic Roman fonts so widely employed automatically in day-to-day printing (Baines and Haslam 2005: 62-65). Neither bold nor daring, it is a cautious decision.

Turning to the "Bush Cheney '04" image (see Figure 2), "BUSH" is rendered in a bold oblique sans serif Helvetica-style font (such as Helvetica Neue) with particularly thickened verticals, squatty in stature. The spacing of the characters is greatly condensed (perhaps -10% or more). Of particular importance in identifying this font is the termination of the curve of the S, which has a sharp horizontal unlike many sans serifs (such as Gill Sans), which have a vertical termination. The letters are of continuous construction. The shape

shows minor thinning at the curves of the letters, and is thicker on the straight areas; see the U in BUSH for example. Unique to a Helvetica-derivative font is the almost equal size of the top and bottom of the capital B. The proportions demonstrate extremely thick letters in general with a color weight that is black (versus light). The contrast of thick to thin within each letter is medium, and the axis of contrast is angled, or oblique, to the right (Baines and Haslam 2005: 54-55).

Ironically, Helvetica is a font traditionally associated with historically liberal and/or socialist artists and their patrons. The choice, moreover, is interesting considering that Helvetica is so commonly chosen when branding large American companies; it is also a font now associated with large institutions and sought-after efficiency — U.S. IRS tax forms, for example, are published in a Helvetica sans serif font. The use of the all caps, extra bold font in the Bush-Cheney image, for example, speaks to certain impressions of power and strength, and it is toward these associations that the designers may have intended more than the modernist associations.

Also worthy of note, the Bush designers were remarkably consistent in their use of this typeface, and the overall logo-like image was maintained from the beginning of his term to its end.[9] Even before the initial selection of his running mate, the Bush name was pictured in the all caps, bold, oblique, sans serif Helvetica font. In this way the blocky four-letter last name became symbolic — an iconic image — of his administrative power. In several cases candidates' designers are more experimental with their use of fonts and layouts prior to the selection of a running mate (example ephemera includes: solo Republican Dole in 1976 with a serif font; solo Democrat McGovern in 1972 with a sans serif; and, solo Humphrey in 1968 with an innovative "H" symbol), but later the choice of serif or sans serif falls more in line with the party image, or becomes more conservative in nature. In many cases the candidates and running mates of the Republican Party are represented in a sans serif font (see Figure 1, McCain/Palin '08; Figure 2, Bush/Cheney '04. Additional examples include: Bush/Cheney '00; Bush/Quayle '92; Ford/Dole '76; Nixon/Agnew '72; and, Nixon/Agnew '68), whereas the

Democratic candidates and running mate names are often represented in a serif font — as seen quite explicitly in the example of Kerry versus Bush (see Figure 1, Obama/Biden '08; Figure 2, Kerry/Edwards '04. Additional examples include: Gore/Lieberman '00; Clinton/Gore '96; Dukakis/Bentsen '88; Carter/Mondale '80; and, McGovern/Shriver '72).

Visual clues seem to favor a theory that the serif font somehow communicates a Democratic brand, while the sans serif communicates a Republican image. And while we see differences in the 2008 campaign — such as McCain's innovative use of a flared sans serif font — the Democratic and Republican font associations still hold true: Obama was represented in serif, McCain in sans serif. These trends, however, apply only to recent years. Earlier campaigns seem less fixed, as in the 1960 campaigns and prior when the associations between font choice and party affiliation almost completely disappear. So too do other stylistic choices: Carter's green and white color choice, for example, is now an option reserved almost exclusively for Green Party members. These findings imply that it has only been in the past several decades that such strong party associations with font choice have become expressly prevalent, and only recently so uniformly controlled.

It is intriguing that ephemeral promotional materials that were extremely experimental in color, used unorthodox fonts, and included photographs or exclamation points, for example, tended to be used by candidates not chosen for election. Decisions in the design of ephemeral and ubiquitous promotional materials used in United States presidential campaigns have employed aesthetic suggestion and "branding" via the politicized medium of typography. Promotional campaign materials influence their viewing audience, communicating something both about the named candidate and then something more subtle about the historical symbolism held in the font itself. Just as certain fonts have been historically enmeshed in the polity that used them, such as the German use of Blackletter that was seen as intrinsically German, typefaces continue to retain their currency on the political stage.

The campaign ephemera considered in this study, like all graphic matter of a similar category, are meaningful in and of themselves, seeking to have a psychological effect on the viewer. The typographic choices communicate to the reader, persuading at an unconscious level. In each election cycle, candidates and their designers choose from an array of fonts and colors a textual image that will become, through its ubiquity, a textual symbol of the candidate's personality. It remains to be seen if recent Democratic serif and Republican san serif tropes will persist or will once again be redefined.

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Fig. 1. 2008 Election, *left,* Barack Obama (Democratic), "Roman" serif font, all caps and proper nouns capitalized; *right,* John McCain (Republican), sans serif font, all caps.

Source: (http://www.4president.org/ocmi2008.htm)

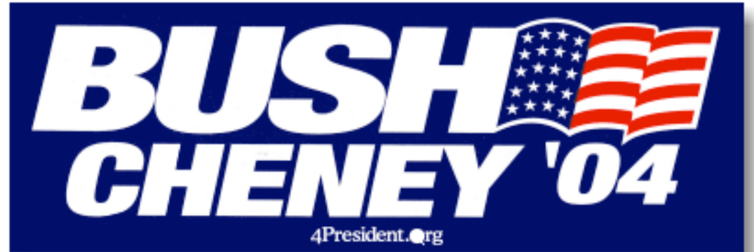

Fig. 2. 2004 Election, *left,* John Kerry (Democratic), "Roman" serif font, proper nouns capitalized ("president" is sans serif); *right,* George W. Bush (Republican) (incumbent), sans serif font, italicized, all caps and proper nouns capitalized.

Source: (http://www.4president.org/ocmi2004.htm)

[1] Regarding the debate surrounding the history of the serif font, see Catich 1968.

[2] Regarding German nationalism and sanctioned typefaces, see Bain et al. 1998.

[3] For further consideration of the ideological debates of art and typography in Nazi Germany, see Burke 1998.

[4] Further reading on the topic can be found in Aynsley 2000.

[5] For further reading, see Lars Muller and Victor Malsy, eds. *Helvetica Forever: Story of a Typeface* (Lars Muller Publishers, 2009).

[6] For more on this topic, see Moriarty and Garramone 1986; Moriarty and Popvich 1991; and Waldman and Devitt 1998.

[7] Regarding the persuasive power of font, see Richardson and Carter 2000.

[8] See the article by Berlow and Highsmith 2008 for more details regarding the design choices of the competition.

[9] An interesting issue in the Bush design campaign is the question of the white serif "W" framed on a square black ground. This sticker seems to be outside the campaign proper and even more so part of a larger "branding" of the office of president. While I suggest that the white serif W targeted the same audience, I further suggest it sought to evoke different emotions — ones less functioning in competition with another political candidate than as a marker of a kind of solidarity among a group of members, i.e., those who were already supporters of the Bush cause. Also of interest are the spin-off versions of the black square/white letter stickers, including J (Jesus) and A (Alabama), to name two. These are, it seems, similar to "insider jokes;" in this case indicative of insider testimonials of loyalty.