

App: Hillary for America

Developer: Hillary for America

Category: Social Networking

Price: Free

Platform: iOS

Tags: Politics, political engagement platforms, real-time control, mobility, affective labour

Tagline? "The only thing standing between Donald Trump and the presidency is us."

Related Apps: MiniVAN, Hustle, eCanvasser

### Politics Appified

Searching for political apps was a window into a divided American electorate during the 2016 president campaign. Results for then-favored candidate Hillary Clinton included all sorts of unofficial apps curiously ranked higher than her own official app (though personalized results complicate any claims of objectivity). It was a bawdy mix mostly of arcade games and emoji makers. The carnivalesque results speaks to a political reality of "fake news" that attracted international attention after Trump's surprise win (for me at least).

Some apps were clear fakes. At the top of my list is an app from a company called OpenDNA. It "borrowed" the Hillary 2016 campaign logo for its unofficial Hillary Elect app that promised in all caps to be "THE ONLY APP YOU NEED TO KEEP UP TO DATE WITH THE HILLARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN!" The app appeared to be more interested in beta-testing OpenDNA's artificial intelligence than Hillary's campaign.

Other apps parodied, supported and opposed her campaign. Some apps pitted candidates against each other in a virtual race or a poker match. Taking known formulas and swapping in Hillary or Donald. Others were openly hostile. A description for the Never Hillary Clinton game began: “My name of Walker Haber. I’m 13 years old and from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Ever since my mom ran for Senate, I realized that everybody loves to pick on the candidate... Similar to the game wack-a-mole, you tap on Hillary’s face whenever you see her pop up in the window” (Haber 2016, np.). For the low price of \$0.99 USD, you can try to beat his high score (96 as of August 2016).

Donald Trump had apps too. You could “Punch the Trump” or receive inspirational quotes all from the same iOS device. Trump had an official app too, “America First”. The app encouraged users to complete actions for the campaign, like sharing key messages, to win points and move up a public leaderboard. The app set updates and let its users donate to the campaign as well. Like many political apps, America First was the product of parties, partisans and political failures that led to its stable set of features (Kreiss 2016). Its developer uCampaign started “in 2014 in reaction to Mitt Romney’s loss in 2012” according to its CEO Thomas Peters, specifically in reaction to the Romney’s campaign “missed opportunity to utilize their smartphone app” (Peters 2016, np.).

I would like to discuss about another app, seen as innovative at the time, but now tainted as part of a failed campaign. Hillary Clinton’s official app, “Hillary 2016”, launched a week prior to Trump’s app. Critics considered it more sophisticated as well (McCormick, 2016) (Hinchliffe 2016). Like Trump’s app, Hillary 2016 sought to make helping the campaign easier for its supporters by creating a friendly game-like way to plug into the campaign. Behind its cartoon-ish interface, the app connected users to a serious political machine bent on winning the campaign.

As leading scholars on digital campaigning look to engaged ethnography and cultural studies to compensate for biases in the field that led to Trump’s victory being unexpected (Kreiss, Barker, and Zenner 2017; Karpf 2017), my interest in

Hillary's app continues an emerging interest in political engagement platforms as logistical media. Ned Rossiter explains: "logistical media – as technologies, infrastructures and software – coordinate, capture, and control the movement of people, finance, and things. Infrastructure makes worlds. Logistics govern them" (Rossiter 2016, 4–5). What is a *political* logistics? How does it coordinate the infrastructures – the smartphones and phone lines, databases and websites – that connect voters to parties and politicians? How did the Hillary 2016 app function as a logistical media? What forms of control do they enable for a campaign? Over who? Though Hillary's campaign failed, her apps endure as important artifacts of political logistical media.

### Your Own Little Campaign Office

Hillary 2016 opened to what Gizmodo called an "appropriately grim surroundings of [a player's] own 'campaign HQ,' a second-floor office with eight chairs, one sofa, and no staff" (Menegus 2016, np.), or what the campaign described as a real Iowa office! Upgrading your grim HQ was a big part of the app. By its own admission, "Your office starts out pretty bare, but as you continue to play, you can spruce up your space" (Hillary for America 2016, np.). Luckily, the app provided its users an easy way to spruce up their virtual offices in exchange for their attention, data and labor.

Users received and competed for challenges deemed important to the campaign through the app. Challenges ranged from checking into a campaign event, sharing some campaign content or completing a quiz. Users who completed the challenges received "stars", which bought items from the app's own store. In-store items like posters, plants and furniture could be placed in the app's bare Iowa office.

Every action in the app also awarded points and, with enough points, the status of being ranked in statewide and national leaderboard. Leaderboards rebooted

every Sunday, so everyone had a chance to win. The app also provided real-world rewards including the promise of an autograph. Jenna Lowenstein, Digital Director of Hillary for America described its “endgame” as “online, offline integration so if you take a lot of actions in the app you can win offline prizes like trips to events” (Politico 2016: np).

Launched in the summer of Pokemon Go, Hillary 2016 was the latest example of gamification in politics. Gamification is when “gaming elements, like scoring points and competition, are extended into nongaming context like education, business, and on-line marketing” (Peters, 2016, p. 143). For their app, the Clinton campaign borrowed tactics from the “most addictive mobile apps and games” according to Lowenstein and applied them to “things that are a little drier” like politics (Politico, 2016, np.). Just as users spruced up their drab virtual offices, the app spruced up mundane volunteering tasks with badges and leaderboards.

Making politics more like a game has its critics. Game designer Andrea Phillips worries that gamification further trivializes the vital sphere of politics, treating it as *just a game* (Phillips 2010). Game scholar Ian Bogost calls gamification bullshit, marketing speak to sell new services (Bogost 2011). These critics argue that gamification changes the meaning of a political campaign from deliberation to play, but that was precisely the point of the app. The app’s austere virtual office put a friendly face on the reality that the app was a distributed sensor of the campaign (Andrejevic and Burdon 2015).

### Apps and Logistical Media

When asked to describe the motivations behind the app, Lowenstein suggested it was about widening the campaigning: “We set out at the beginning of the election to think about what parts of our support base have been under-served by traditional campaigning” (Politico 2016, np.). Lowenstein echoes a trend in American politics to use mobile phones and apps to reach new or disconnected

voters (Baldwin-Philippi 2015). Instead of connecting to voters through a webpage or a phone line, the Hillary 2016 app installed on a smartphone, a device that most Americans check hourly (Newport 2015). Once installed, the app was one way for the campaign to coordinate supporters' preoccupations and desires, converting them into simple tasks, donations and moments of attention. In doing so, the app continued the tighter integration of social media sharing and citizen campaigning (Baldwin-Philippi 2015; Gibson 2015; Kreiss 2016).

Hillary's app was just another iteration of a longstanding desire for a political logistics operating on the ground, next to the voter. In 1919, Samuel Peter Orth described voter profiling as a key part of Tammany Hall, the political machine created by the Democratic Party in New York State that lasted until the 1960s. Orth explained that precinct captains are "acquainted with every voter in his precinct and keeps track, as far as possible, of his affairs" and that "Tammany's machinery enables a house-to-house canvass to be made in one day" (Orth 1919, 90). Arguably, the canvasser's clipboard was the first mobile political app. Their clipboards were mobile media to record and report from the field, part of a well-oiled political machine.

Since Tammany Hall, this logistical desire has led to many new political "applications". Beginning in the 1960s, direct mail allowed campaigns to reach voters directly. Computer databases let campaigns better focus on the most sympathetic voters, connecting on common, categorized, issues (Johnson 2016). Improvements to canvassing sped up reports from the field. By the early 2000s, Palm Pilots, the smartphone's predecessor, digitized the entire ground game as canvassers pecked responses with a stylus and later uploaded results to the campaign's database (rVotes 2016). Hillary's app then has to be understood with this incomplete history of political logistical media. Its gamification being the latest in a long series of innovations designed to improve how a campaign communicates with a voter and coordinates them.

## I'd like to Talk to You Today about Apps

Hillary 2016 functioned as a logistical media, in part, through its coordination of data to and from voters. Hillary's app included a newsfeed in case you wanted some newspapers to fill your virtual office. Information flowed from the campaign to the app. Users who opened the app received specific news without any traditional gatekeepers. The app was another example of what Bennett and Manhiem call a one-way flow. Rejecting the classic model of a two-step flow where opinion leaders mediate political messages to the general public, "the communication process is aimed at the individual or at the direct messaging of assembled networks of like demographics" (2006, 215). The Hillary app, for all its poster buying and promise of autographs, was an attempt to use emotion and play to distinguish a campaign channel from its competitors. This one-step flow typically suffers from fragmentation, with voters able to quickly change the channel or multi-task the app in today's world.

Gamification further tried to address the challenges of a one-step flow by encouraging social sharing. Rather than hearing about the Hillary from the campaign, the app encouraged players to invite their friends to the campaign or send them a bumper sticker. Users became their own medium, personalizing campaign messages (Nielsen 2012). The app even awarded users who shared their phone's contact list with the campaign, a common ask of political apps made friendlier through its game-like interface (Carson 2016).

Data also flows directly back into Hillary's campaign as well. The Hillary for America campaign had a unified privacy policy that collected information "when you fill out a form, send us an email... or otherwise communicate with [it]." It collected any contact or identifying information. It used that information to "carry out any other purpose for which the information was collected" and shares information with vendors, consultants, service providers and volunteers (Hillary for America, 2016a). In short, the app collected as much as it could, whenever it could and shared it with anyone involved in the campaign.

Though I haven't heard much reporting about how the app's data helped the campaign (if it even did), it is not hard to imagine the leaderboards being used to identify high-energy supporters. Gamification became a way for supporters to self-rank their commitment, or what surveillance scholar David Lyon (2003) calls social sorting. The term refers to techniques to identify, rank and manage populations. Where Lyon investigates the governmental and corporate techniques to sort people, the Clinton campaign elected a more user-generated system. The very act of winning – being at the top of the list – marked an alignment between the game and political logistics of weighting voter's probable support.

Data from the app might have helped the campaign assess the effectiveness of its key messages. The Liberal Party of Canada used a similar technique when they created a mobile app for their election "platform", a document that displayed their policy statements. As users read the app and lingered over certain sections, they sent feedback to the campaign (Ryan 2016). Could quizzes be a tool to evaluate the "stickiness" of key talking points?

### Closer to the Skin: Affect and Political Apps

The app exemplifies the changing emotional relations between voters and parties in addition to the data flows discussed above. Hillary 2016 exemplifies how campaigns harness supporters' affective labor in the heat of the campaign. Zizi Papacharissi defined affective labor through the example of advertising. It "engages potential consumers through the suggestion of a possible affective attachment they might develop for a product" (2015, 21). Campaigns do the same for politicians and voters. They are trying to tell a story, develop a relation or emote with the voter.

Hillary 2016 succeeded as a tool for political logistics according to Dan Carson, a former Design Lead for Obama's 2012 campaign by making "new users feel

welcome” and for “silly stuff like watering plants, and feeding the dog” that kept users coming back to the app (2016, np.). These emotional touches established a routine, making the app a friendly place. As users could wake up and check their phone for updates, then have the app there app there to harness their anxieties and hopes into tangible campaign tasks. Just as Amazon has launched its own mobile buttons to facilitate the quick, almost instinctual, re-ordering of product like laundry soap or diaper, the Hillary 2016 app tried to give supporters a button to push to feel involved.

Voters should have felt in a good place when using the app. The campaign often depended on their emotional labor. Tasks required a user’s to share a key message or reach out to a friend to talk about the election. The app’s friendly design, in other words, enabled its users to project their emotions into the campaign’s messages.

The app could also translate voter’s emotional state into campaign donations (though critics found the donate button hard to find). Voters could reach for their Hillary 2016 app in the exuberance of a Hillary speech or in the despair of a poll and donate. The mobile donations of the Hillary 2016 app draw on the lessons learned by the 2012 Barack Obama campaign. The mobile phone presented both a problem and a solution for modern fundraising. Cumbersome donation forms delay or stop donations. The Obama 2012 campaign, for example, found that a quarter of its emails were opened on mobile devices, but resulted in a completed donation less frequently. Working with another campaign technology company, the campaign created the Quick Donate tool that allowed voters to donate quickly in “one-click” or via text message. Users, without thinking about it, could translate their emotions into donations. These “one-click” donors gave three times as much money, four times as often when compared to conventional donation requests. Teddy Goff, Digital Director for the Obama 2012 Campaign, told Bloomberg News: “We had people giving \$1,000 via text” (quoted in Green 2012, np.). Without the hassle of completing a form or the distraction of the Internet, the Quick Donate created a new circuit from smart phones to bank statements to



campaign finances. Hillary 2016 offered a similar phone-based donation solution, one that had the same potential to connect with the voter affectively, priming them to donate as an expression of their emotional state.

### Campaigns Having Always Been Trying to Reach into your Pockets

These features of The Hillary 2016 app point toward the widening reach of the campaign, or rather, the campaign assemblage that brings together a heterogeneous mix of professionals, amateurs and volunteers (Nielsen 2012). Increasingly, campaigns depend on what I've called political engagement platforms to coordinate its parts in a common medium of communication (McKelvey and Piebiak 2016).

The Democratic Party uses NGP VAN as its principle political engagement platform. It is the result of the merger of the Voter Activation Network, a political database, and NGP software in 2010. Since then, NGP VAN has become a major part of the infrastructure running through the party. As the company explained in a recent product launch: "a lot of our products were initially designed as complex back-end [customer relations management systems], but what's happened within our products is that over the past couple years especially the user numbers have exploded and that's because campaigns are giving more access to users that they would never have given access to before." In reaction, NGP VAN explained: "We're focused on building VAN for more people, and we're focused on building VAN in a way where you can provide interactions through more channels and making it the primary engagement platform for the campaign" (*NGP VAN Next* 2014: np.). Cutting through the hype, NGP VAN is telling its customers – the people who run Hillary Clinton's campaign, other Democrats and Canada's Liberal Party – that NGP VAN it is trying to be the central media and information technology embedded throughout the campaign and necessary for all as much of

the routine tasks of possible. The app that becomes the ingress of this participation.

In the future, the Hillary 2016 app might be a prototype for new, public-facing apps closely connected to a party's political engagement platform. Where NGP VAN presently includes a campaign-centric app called MiniVAN mostly used for mobile canvassing, future campaigns may use the gamification rhetoric seen in Hillary 2016 as a way to better enlist disconnected voters in its political logistics. Badges and prizes would provide a more accessible and intuitive means to align a voter's idle time with the campaign's strategic objectives.

In that case, new iterations of Hillary 2016 will be part of the changing function of the app as a logistical media for politics. Where NGP VAN provides its own custom apps, another platform called NationBuilder has opened its Application Programming Interface or API. Developers program their own unique apps to connect to the platform. It is a new vector in the campaign's mobility. Some NationBuilder apps duplicate the like of digital canvassing like MiniVAN. Others alter a campaign's communication flows. Hustle, which integrates into NationBuilder, replaces phone calls or emails with SMS text messages. Hustle broadcasts messages in the native language of the mobile phone, the text. Hustle's website advertises that campaigns can send message faster than traditional phone calls and with a better response rate. It removes all the cultural baggage of phone calls and embraces the text culture. Its website showcases rapid organizing via chat windows, all connected to a known list of supporters and a system tracking responses (Miller 2016). In doing so, Hustle like Hillary 2016 suggests that the campaign assemblage and its logistical media will increasingly gravitate toward the smartphone.

Zuckerberg vs. Kayne 2020

For all the prior discussion of political logistics, the 2016 election seems to have been won by an altogether different political machine: a mass media machine obsessed with Trump and his tweets. Trump did not need to coordinate a win through logistics, he, instead, persuaded enough people to believe in his fantasy broadcast online and on cable. Supporters could believe that Trump wanted the best for them and for America, even though it is not clear that Trump himself cares. A skilled reality TV star, Trump's kayfabe – the code wrestlers obey when they pretend staged events are real – amplified a political double-speak where political extremism becomes indistinguishable from inside jokes (Klein 2017). Winks and innuendos circumvented those things you cannot say on TV to speak directly without being direct, playing to the misogynist and racist desires in some of his voters. The great spectacle engulfed the attention and capacities of outsiders and opponents. No logistics could mute it and the collective “what-if” proved too tempting.

The Trump and Hillary campaign then represent two kinds of political machines. Trump emphasized a political imagination. Hillary focused on a political reality. Politics aside, neither machine is right or wrong. A political imagination could be very different, perhaps progressive and inclusive. Sophisticated voter targeting, by contrast, can be creepy, an antecedent to the authoritarian state that Trump codes in terms of bans or winning. Nor are these machines mutually exclusive. Did the Obama campaign integrate political imagination and logistics? These questions must occupy studies of politics, aware of both the symbolic and technical expressions of political antagonism. Now, which machine is more effective? That may be decided in the next US Election when Kayne's dark and twisted fantasy runs against Zuckerberg's engagement machine.

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