Community Proposal

> "Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one." (Barthes, *S/Z*, 1970, p. 6)

In the digital age, Barthe's vision of the triumphant text has become a forecast of the cyberspace many of us now inhabit. Digital technology has provided a host of tools for large-scale collaborative networks. This development has resulted in community narratives being distributed over multiple media forms in such a way that the narratives themselves shift based on the new array of individual points of entry. As a result, for politicians, their campaign teams, and political activist groups, the creation and management of a coherent narrative can be a daily struggle. Digital media creates a host of opportunities for engaging in political discourse. But in the transition to new media forms, authors struggle to work with and against the emerging technologies. On the same note, academics researching this process face a host of methodological issues as they attempt to capture, analyze, visualize, and assess the impact of the text(s) of these emerging digital narratives.

The Author Unknown research group will focus on questions of authorship, agency, accident, and intentionality in the development of online political campaigns. As a research community, we will investigate methodological options for addressing the questions: *How can we understand the ways digital technology is transforming how we tell political narratives, the ways these narratives are disseminated and retold, and the place of technology in the development of the shape and content of the stories that are told?*

David Gutterman, Associate Professor of Politics, is looking at how the capacity of political leaders and activists to craft cohesive and resonant political narratives has been transformed by new information technology. Amber Davisson, Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Media Studies, will explore the Google Search Engine as both a point of entry for online political narratives and a potential author of those narratives. Stanislav Vysotsky, Assistant Professor of Sociology, will be focusing on the way in which narratives are framed and constructed within the context of extreme-right Internet forums and its overlaps with discourse in more mainstream political movements. As a community, we will be meeting over the summer to discuss three topics central to all of our research: Methodology, narrative theory, and the historical development of online political campaigns (see Appendix A for Reading List). This literature will provide a jumping off point for discussions about the tools each of our fields can provide for dealing with the questions created by narrative production in the age of digital technology.

The new text that Barthes envisioned brings with it a new set of challenges. The conversations in this research group will help students and faculty members to develop interdisciplinary perspectives necessary for confronting those challenges in their own research, and in making sense of the quickly changing world we inhabit.