Ethical Programs
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It is now commonplace to argue that the Internet has fundamentally changed the nature of political campaigning. Presidential campaigns such as those of Howard Dean, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have shown us how fundraising, get out the vote (GOTV) activities, and volunteer mobilization all change significantly when certain new media technologies are deployed. Rhetoricians and scholars in many disciplines continue to examine how web technologies are shifting the terrain of political campaigns by examining campaign websites, the tools that campaigns use to distribute information, and how volunteers use the Internet to organize. While this work has provided a number of detailed accounts of how text and image express arguments and how the Internet allows for various kinds of collaborative efforts, my focus in this chapter will be to explore how procedures, computational and otherwise, express arguments and how they shape and constrain writing and political action. In this discussion of what Ian Bogost calls procedural rhetoric, I discuss the ethical predicament of hospitality in terms of how power is organized in networks. The focus of this chapter is the 2008 Obama campaign’s efforts during the Democratic primary and the general election. I focus on this campaign because it is credited by many as a kind of tipping point in the use of new media for campaigning. While previous campaigns certainly used networked technologies, the 2008 Obama campaign was seen as a giant leap forward. In fact, the 2012 campaign brought into focus the fact that Obama’s election machinery was still far beyond some of his opponents. In postmortems of Mitt Romney’s failed presidential bid, analysts noted a number of technological failures. The campaign’s “Orca” software, a system designed to help the Romney campaign coordinate volunteer efforts, melted down on Election Day. Sean Gallagher of Ars Technica detailed the system’s failures, from inadequate mobile server infrastructure to the distribution of invalid PIN codes. While most would agree that these glitches were not the
cause of Romney’s loss, they were evidence that campaigns were still working to catch up to the mechanisms and procedures built by Obama in 2008.

This chapter will describe the infrastructure that the Obama campaign established in 2008, detailing how it was able to coordinate a network of supporters, one that they managed from the center. However, that network was distributed and offered a certain amount of autonomy to volunteers. This chapter takes up these conflicting dimensions of power by way of Galloway’s theory of protocol, examining how the campaign constructed a complex and contradictory ethical program for addressing the predicament of hospitality.

How did the campaign create, manage, and maintain this network? In addition, my analysis will ask how volunteers, as nodes in that network, constructed their own ethical programs in response to those of the campaign.

The difficulties facing volunteers and the Obama campaign are a version of a broader ethical predicament: How does the administrating entity of a network balance freedom with control? How does a member of that network move through it, avoiding a rigid programmatic ethics handed down from above while also avoiding the fiction of pure, autonomous freedom? In short, how did both the campaign and its volunteers engage the Law of hospitality, and what ethical programs did they craft in response?

In my examination of the Obama campaign and its volunteers, I suggest that procedural rhetoric offers one way of understanding how both the campaign and volunteers navigated these problems. Obama’s campaign team included paid and volunteer workers, and all involved authored sets of procedures to make arguments. These procedural arguments by no means solved the ethical predicaments of networks and power, but they did offer a novel mode of rhetorical action in such spaces. As we will see, the authoring and execution of procedures is not confined to software. One of my focuses will be the Obama campaign’s social networking software, MyBarackObama.com (hereafter referred to by its popular and unfortunate moniker, MyBO). Through its software and its campaign infrastructure, the Obama campaign deployed procedural arguments, providing volunteers with scripts for the telephone calls they would make to potential voters and with procedures that expressed what kinds of activities were most important. These scripts were not necessarily followed verbatim, and volunteers authored their own procedures. By tracking the arguments embedded in the Obama campaign’s software and its phone-banking scripts, we can gain a more complete picture of its complex, conflicting, and contradictory messages, and we can see how contemporary campaigns must continually engage the complexities of a hospitable network. As political campaigns continue to take advantage of digital media, procedural rhetoric offers one way to both welcome and control volunteers, but (perhaps more important) procedural rhetoric also allows the
volunteers themselves to move through and write back against and, in some cases, resist networked power. I describe this as “writing back” not in order to describe the volunteers as freely acting agents—we will see that this is far from the truth—but rather to suggest that procedural rhetoric presents one strategy for attending to the complex power dynamics of networks.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray argues that digital environments have four essential properties. They are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic. They are procedural because software is an authored set of procedures, which can be used to “write rules . . . that are recognizable as an interpretation of the world.” Her focus is on storytelling, but we will see that any piece of software can be seen as an expressive, rhetorical model of a system. In addition to being procedural, digital environments also invite participation in that their rule-based behaviors are “responsive to our input” and they also “represent navigable space.” From navigating hyperlinks to playing first-person shooter games, we experience this spatiality in myriad ways. Finally, digital environments are encyclopedic in that they allow us to “store and retrieve quantities of information far beyond what was possible before.”

Websites, video games, and digital fiction all take advantage of the ability to store massive amounts of information in databases.

All of these properties intersect with a discussion of new media and political campaigning. But while we might expect that a discussion of political rhetoric and software would focus on the participatory nature of digital environments, my focus here will be on procedurality. As Murray argues, authorship in electronic media is much more than constructing a narrative (or, we might add, an argument):

Authorship in electronic media is procedural. Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions.

Thus while we might continue to study “the texts themselves,” a study accounting for software also requires us to understand the rules by which those texts appear—their procedurality. What is truly novel about the text of digital environments is not only its appearance on screens or even its organization via hyperlinks. To be sure, these two traits are important, but the ubiquity of software, a relatively new medium of expression as compared to text or speech, asks us to consider the role of rules and processes in digital environments.

The theorist who has done the most to connect procedurality and rhetoric is Ian Bogost. In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost develops his theory of proce-
dural rhetoric. He explains this theory with examples from video games in order to demonstrate how games are one example of “persuading through processes.” Video games use procedural expression to make arguments; players interact with those arguments and, depending upon how the game is designed, are offered a conceptual space to critique them. For instance, Bogost examines the procedural rhetoric of the video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. In particular, he analyzes one of San Andreas’s more innovative features—the requirement that the player-character must eat to maintain stamina and strength: “Eating moderately maintains energy, but eating high-fat-content foods increases CJ’s weight, and fat gangsters can’t run or fight very effectively.” Bogost admits that the game’s features with regard to nutrition are “rudimentary,” but he also insists that these features make an important argument:

The fact that the player must feed his character to continue playing does draw attention to the limited material conditions the game provides for satisfying that need, subtly exposing the fact that problems of obesity and malnutrition in poor communities can partly be attributed to the relative ease and affordability of fast food.

Through its computational processes, San Andreas expresses arguments about problems with inner city life. The player of San Andreas is placed into a world and asked to interact with that world, and the game’s design invites such engagement and expresses its worldview via procedures.

Procedural rhetoric offers a useful analytic tool in at least two ways. First, it offers a range of scholarly fields (rhetoric included) a way to examine software that generates text, sound, and image. As Bogost argues, much work in digital rhetoric “tends to focus on the presentation of traditional materials—especially text and images—without accounting for the computational underpinnings of that presentation.” While digital rhetoricians have often attended to visual rhetorics and to the genres emerging in online spaces, procedural rhetoric offers a way to deepen this work by thinking about the authorship of procedures that generate image and text and that invite or discourage interaction. Such work can be part of a larger project of cultivating software literacies, something scholars of rhetoric, writing, and speech can and should participate in. But procedural rhetoric also offers a broader rhetorical theory, one that can be used to study “any medium—computational or not—that accomplishes its inscription via processes.” We interact with procedures on a daily basis, and those procedures express particular worldviews. Procedural authorship is not confined to software design, and Bogost argues that processes can have complex relationships to ideologies and cultures: “Processes
like military interrogation and customer relations are cultural. We tend to think of them as flexible and porous, but they are crafted from a multitude of protracted, intersecting cultural processes.” In my own discussion, these two uses of procedural rhetoric—the study of software and the study of procedures more broadly—intersect. Here the double meaning of ethical programs is crucial, as the Obama campaign’s use of software and its volunteers’ use of procedures (specifically, the crafting of phone-banking scripts designed to persuade) mirror one another. In both cases, procedures are authored in response to the predicament of hospitality. The campaign navigates between absolute hospitality and conditional hospitality by funneling volunteers to certain kinds of activities and encouraging them to make certain kinds of arguments; volunteers accept the campaign’s welcome and also attempt to write their own arguments, even though such arguments are circumscribed by the campaign’s desires and directions. By examining procedures used by the campaign and those authored by volunteers, I show both how the Obama campaign operated within a protocological network, one that simultaneously exerted vertical, hierarchical power while also allowing volunteers to operate in a distributed fashion, and how volunteers used procedural arguments to navigate their way through that protocological infrastructure.

Networks do not merely distribute power horizontally, allowing nodes to freely communicate with one another. They are not rhizomatic spaces in which rhetorical agents act on their own. Rather, Alexander Galloway’s work shows us how protocological power operates in networks, coupling rhizomatic distribution with hierarchical organization. The 2008 Obama campaign is a perfect example of how these two contradictory machines work in tandem. But more than this, the volunteers who helped propel Obama into office present evidence that procedural rhetoric is one way to navigate protocological networks. Galloway argues that though one cannot oppose protocol (just as one cannot oppose gravity), political action is indeed possible in spaces of protocological control, and he presents possibilities for acting within networks, such as hacking, tactical media, and Internet art. In this chapter, we will see that procedural rhetoric is yet another example of how one can move through, resist, and write in networks by examining how Obama campaign volunteers used procedures to work within the protocological network established by the campaign. Those volunteers were not necessarily looking to resist or subvert that network, unless they were John McCain or Hillary Clinton supporters looking to sabotage the campaign (something that will no doubt become more prevalent as campaigns like the 2008 Obama effort become more common). However, volunteers were looking to help shape the campaign. From within a carefully constructed protocological network, volunteers received procedural arguments from the Obama campaign, argu-
ments that aimed to shape how volunteers encountered potential voters and how they recruited other volunteers. Those volunteers interacted with these procedures and often authored some of their own.

Digital Media and Political Campaigns

The examination of new media and political campaigns has been under way for well over a decade. During their focus group study conducted prior to the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary, Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Kirsten Foot examined how potential voters interacted with campaign websites, and they determined that voters were well aware of the promises and challenges of new media technologies:

Participants viewed the Internet as offering potential for political participation; at the same time, they were skeptical of whether candidates are willing or able to use the human interactive capacity of this new medium to the fullest extent. Some expressed an awareness of the limited power they have as citizen-users to engage with campaigns online.12

Participants in this study saw candidates offering interactive features on their websites (such as the ability to e-mail candidates, search for information on issues, or participate in forum discussions), but they also understood the challenges of inviting “genuine interaction between candidates or campaign staff and citizens.”13 From the sheer number of possible interactions to the difficulties of message control, study participants understood the delicate dance of interactive websites. This is something that nearly all of the scholars I will mention here address: How do new media technologies that invite interaction both participate in and resist the tightly controlled messages of political campaigns? The fact that study participants were aware of this problem indicates the degree to which this approach to campaigning has reached critical mass.

While many participants spoke of having “control” when it came to surfing campaign websites and seeking out their own answers, Stromer-Galley and Foot argue that interactive elements of websites allow campaigns to “give an appearance that users are in control of the experience and getting the information from the candidate that they want while masking the actual, relatively limited scope of user control.”14 Thus, campaigns still exert a great deal of control over their message, even if users are afforded ways of interacting with information. Stromer-Galley and Foot argue that this asymmetrical power relation could be reduced by “increasing the possibility of human interaction” and that “to date, most U.S. campaigns have not employed the human interac-
Writing in 2000, prior to campaigns such as Howard Dean’s in which the web was used to connect voters with the candidate’s platform and with one another, Stromer-Galley and Foot suggest how candidates might seek out opportunities to interact with potential voters.

In a text that draws upon the volunteer mobilization efforts of the Dean and Bush campaigns, Foot and Steven Schneider argue that web campaigning expands the possibilities for political action. Foot and Schneider move beyond the study of candidate-to-voter interaction and examine how potential voters interact with one another. To account for expanded possibilities afforded by technology, they examine the rhetorical strategies of web campaigning:

“The essence of campaigning is persuading. Within the general framework of persuasion, we define and examine four practices in web campaigning—informing, involving, connecting, and mobilizing—suggesting that each practice involves a distinct type of relationship between campaign organizations and other political actors.”

By studying how campaigns employ these four practices, they hope to account for the strategies specific to web technologies. Most important, for our purposes, Foot and Schneider view the new media objects of campaigns as artifacts that express political arguments, and the authors are attuned to the expressive and rhetorical potential of web objects:

We view Web objects—whether pages, features, texts, or links—produced by actors in electoral contexts as artifacts manifesting political strategies and actions. Many, but certainly not all, aspects of Web producing activity can be inferred through careful observation of Web objects. In our observational analyses, we engage in a kind of “Web archaeology” whereby we infer practices from artifacts, that is, Web objects. Campaign sites are surfaces on which campaigns’ Web production practices are inscribed dynamically during (and beyond) an electoral cycle. They carry online structures that simultaneously evidence the communicative and political actions of the campaigns that produce them and enable the organization of sociopolitical actions on the part of site visitors—some of which may also become inscribed on the campaign site.

This description of web objects as manifesting political strategies is one that software studies scholars would take for granted. Nonetheless, it is an important observation. Political platforms are not only the product of a candidate’s speeches or pamphlets—they are also created, expressed, and reinforced by way of digital media. Further, Foot and Schneider also explain that campaigns fully recognize that merely having a website is not enough. Campaigns must also “manage their Web presence as it is mediated across the electoral Web
sphere on sites that they do not and cannot control. . . . The dispatching of campaign site visitors to other Web sites to promote the candidate stimulates coproduction of the campaign’s Web presence and of the electoral Web sphere.18 As we will see later in this chapter, this strategy played out in interesting ways with the Obama campaign as volunteers were tasked with authoring their own arguments about Obama’s political platform.

One more early study of new media and campaigning is worth mentioning here, since it documents some of the earliest attempts at using games: Gary Selnow’s Electronic Whistle-Stops.19 While he does not address voter-to-voter interaction, Selnow does examine some of the computational artifacts with which campaigns in the 1990s experimented. He explains how campaigns used database technologies to carve up voters by traits and how they used such technologies to present the illusion of personal contact between candidate and voter: “A closer look reveals that these warm, personal messages, in most cases, are generated by cold, compassionless computers. Truly personal or not, the candidates have been looking for a sure course around the wire, tube, or print, and computers can provide it.”20 Such concerns continue to trouble scholars. Writing in the wake of the Obama campaign, Bruce Gronbeck argues that digital campaigning’s reliance on niche marketing and carefully groomed e-mail lists is one more manifestation of the “clustering of America.”21 Gronbeck argues that emerging technologies allowed candidates to “[chart] voters geodemographically” and to produce “microtargeted, audience-based systems of political messaging, as niche marketing became fully integrated into the presidential campaign communication processes.”22 But the characterization of computers as cold and compassionless is one that a great deal of work in software studies disrupts. These voter lists and “personal messages” are not generated by “computers” alone but rather by collaborations between humans and machines. The messages generated by such collaborations may in fact be artificially personal, but they are generated by software, which is authored by humans and which uses procedures to express ideas and arguments.

While Selnow’s main focus is on how the Internet invites interactivity and connectivity, he does devote some space to a discussion of games. In particular, he discusses games such as The Third Millennium organization’s Balance the Budget Game, which allowed players to “estimate the proportion of the $1.5 trillion federal budget spent in nine categories.”23 Selnow argues that such games were little more than experiments and novelties and that they were focused on collecting data about users. Further, he argues that most ran in batch mode and did not allow for true interactivity. Users entered data, and the program returned a result, making for a less than dynamic gaming expe-
rience. Even so, these games were many steps ahead of campaign websites in the late 1990s. As Selnow explains, Bob Dole’s campaign page allowed for user interaction, but this was mainly focused on allowing users to print their own posters or send electronic postcards. As limited as this seems, Selnow notes that the site was somewhat revolutionary: “As far as political Websites went, it was a minor Treasure Island of amusements.” Still, Selnow’s discussion of games and interaction seems prescient. He argued that increased interactivity and a shift away from batch mode would make for interactions that “will be a lot more interesting.”

While certain aspects of campaigning with new media have become more interesting and complex, the use of games has not moved as quickly as we might expect. This is not to say that political games have been completely absent. In fact, complex, procedurally expressive games about laws and policies have appeared more and more often in recent years. One example is The Redistricting Game, developed by researchers at the University of Southern California to educate citizens about gerrymandering. The game models the process of drawing boundaries for voting districts, and it demonstrates how this process is driven by party politics. However, such procedurally rhetorical games have not emerged in the sphere of political campaigns, and Bogost argues that most political games fail to tap the affordances of procedural expression. Rather than making it possible for players to “embody political positions and engage in political actions that many will never have previously experienced,” most contemporary political games are little more than gimmicks. Games like The Redistricting Game use procedures to make arguments about corruption and party politics, allowing players to face situations they might not otherwise have the opportunity to face. According to Bogost, politicians have largely failed to create such procedural artifacts. He extends this argument in How to Do Things with Videogames, arguing that most political games are more interested in “politicking” and winning elections than in policy, and he once again argues that this approach misses the powerful, expressive potential of computational procedures. Procedural arguments could be used to model political policies, allowing citizens to experience other possible worlds and leading them to reflect on how policy decisions might affect their lives. But I am less interested in evaluating whether or not campaigns have successfully deployed immersive procedural rhetorics than I am in understanding how the procedural rhetorics of campaigns reveal arguments and worldviews and how they are used to exert control. Further, I am interested in how procedural arguments invite interaction and, at certain moments, invite further procedural authorship. As we have seen, both scholars and citizens are aware of the value of a campaign staying “on message,” even as they invite participation from
volunteers and supporters. Understanding how procedural rhetorics operate (in particular, those that invite interaction) helps us see how emerging technologies are part of the dynamics of control.

The Howard Dean campaign’s videogame is an example of how procedural arguments can make complex and sometimes contradictory arguments. In an attempt to create a political videogame that made better use of procedural authorship, Bogost teamed up with Gonzalo Frasca to design a videogame for the Howard Dean campaign. That game made two arguments. One was about “the logic of grassroots outreach.” Players of the game were tasked with recruiting volunteers, just as they would as volunteers for the Dean campaign. The second procedural argument of the game involved the activities of volunteers: “sign-waving, door-to-door canvassing, and pamphleteering.” Bogost and Frasca were attempting to build a game that moved beyond some of the more hollow attempts at political games. And while Bogost and Frasca’s game succeeded in making a particular argument about grassroots activism, “it inadvertently exposed the underlying ideology of the campaign.” That ideology was, in the words of one critic of the game, more about “handing out leaflets” than about Dean’s policy positions. This particular critic pointed out that the game made no explicit arguments about the Dean campaign itself and demonstrated only that the campaign was trying to expand the number of volunteers. Instead of using procedures to make arguments about health-care reform by, say, simulating the experience of what it’s like to be unemployed and without insurance, the game only modeled the process of recruiting volunteers and carrying out GOTV activities. Thus, the game presented no procedural arguments about why one would want to vote for Dean or join his campaign. Further, the procedures revealed something that the campaign would not necessarily argue overtly—namely, that campaigning is primarily about recruitment, not about issues. By modeling this argument procedurally, the game actually undercut the campaign’s attempts to enlist volunteers to spread Dean’s policy arguments.

As we will see, this is perhaps one of the central difficulties of procedural arguments. They model systems in ways that may or may not align with the discursive arguments forwarded by political campaigns. While my own discussion here does not examine videogames, it does locate procedural arguments in a different kind of campaign software—the MyBO social networking software. Like the games analyzed by Bogost, that software mounted arguments. Much like the Howard Dean videogame, the software used by the Obama campaign “inadvertently exposed the underlying ideology of the campaign.” This “undercutting” of the campaign’s narrative indicates that procedural rhetorics are not necessarily the best fit for campaigns that aim to stay “on message.” If procedural arguments open up a space for users/au-
dences to reflect on procedures, then it’s possible that procedural rhetoric will necessarily undercut and contradict the dominant message of a political campaign. Procedural arguments involve explicit statements (“If X, then do Y”), but this does not mean that the arguments themselves are explicit. Like an enthymeme that omits one of its premises, a procedural argument has embedded assumptions, and this invites the audience to interact and interpret. Engaging with a procedural argument involves more than reading content—it involves reading the rules that generate that content and understanding how those rules express certain worldviews. Further, procedural arguments simultaneously insist on the execution of sets of instructions and invite interaction with those instructions. Once again, we are presented with the predicament of hospitality—procedural rhetoric both invites interaction and attempts to hold it at a distance. Without interaction, the procedures of the Obama campaign (or any other political campaign) would be useless. The phone-banking scripts, letter-writing instructions, and social media functions of contemporary political campaigns (all of which lay out procedural arguments) require a distributed network of volunteers. However, those same procedures are attempting to exert control over how volunteers interact with potential voters and with one another.

Alexander Galloway’s work on protocol, a term he uses to describe contemporary organizations of power, offers a useful way of understanding these attempts by the campaign to exert control via a distributed network. In Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization, Galloway describes how power and control circulate through networks. For Galloway, the contemporary organization of power is best described by protocol, specifically computer protocols that “govern how specific technologies are agreed to, adopted, implemented, and ultimately used by people around the world. What was once a question of consideration and sense is now a question of logic and physics.” In this sense, protocol in networked life isn’t a question of how one should address the queen of England. While there is a protocol for such an encounter and while that protocol is an ethical program, it is different from the protocols that Galloway theorizes, since the latter are primarily focused on how computation shapes what one can or cannot do in a given networked space. Technological protocols establish a possibility space, and on the Internet they determine how (or whether) packets of information flow between nodes. This means that protocols are central to determining political and rhetorical action in networks and that they are the primary method for regulating activity in networks.

Galloway argues that protocol is “a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment.” However, protocological power is not the simple exertion of force by way of top-down regulation. It
operates in a complex fashion and is the result of what Galloway describes as “two opposing machines”: “One machine radically distributes control into autonomous locales, the other machine focuses control into rigidly defined hierarchies. The tension between these two machines—a dialectical tension—creates a hospitable climate for protocological control.”

Galloway argues that protocol is best understood by examining how Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) and the Domain Name System (DNS) work together to regulate and control Internet traffic. As I discussed in the introduction’s discussion of RFC 761, TCP/IP is a set of protocols that defines how packets of information move between servers. It is a set of rules that ensures that these servers know how to format and read those packets of information, and it ensures the flow of information among nodes. However, this flow is always accompanied by the vertical, top-down mechanism of DNS. DNS matches particular IP addresses with particular domain names, ensuring that the information moving through the Internet and sitting on servers can be accessed. DNS establishes a rigid hierarchy of top-level domains (TLDs), such as .com and .net, and it sorts servers into each of these categories. Google falls under the .com TLD and the University of Wisconsin’s website falls under .edu. This hierarchy determines how an Internet server is discovered and accessed. But this tree-like structure is more than just a sorting mechanism, because “each branch of the tree holds absolute control over everything below it.”

This top-down structure means that one can “turn off” a website by removing DNS support. In this situation, the data may in fact still be present on servers, but the removal of DNS would mean that servers would have no way of finding that data.

This discussion of DNS and TCP/IP reminds us that the notion of a purely “rhizomatic” Internet is a fiction. The flow of information must always pass through hierarchical machines, which determine what packets can and cannot pass. Galloway’s mention of how networks are hospitable spaces for protocological control is, of course, essential to my discussion of rhetoric and ethics in the network. As I have argued, networked life is instituted by the Law of hospitality, the unconditional welcome of the other. As Wendy Chun puts it, channeling Derrida, “fiber-optic networks open the home.” That opening of the home means that “electronic contact . . . cannot be divided into the ‘safe’ and the ‘dangerous’ based on content because the risk of exposure underlies all electronic exchanges.” Protocol’s response to this exposure is the development of a technique for control, allowing for the flow of information (without which there would be no network) but carefully controlling how and whether that information flows. Protocol is another instance of the laws of hospitality, the rules authored in response to the unrelenting Law of hospitality.

Building upon the success of the Howard Dean and George W. Bush cam-
campaigns, Obama’s campaign authored its own laws of hospitality, instituting a protocological network by way of a website that made procedural arguments. Those arguments served to organize volunteers and funnel them to certain kinds of activities, but the MyBO site was much more than a campaign brochure. Obama volunteers used the site to phone bank from home and to determine how to most efficiently “block walk” in their neighborhoods. In certain cases, the procedural arguments of the Obama campaign’s software directly contradicted the campaign narrative. While Obama built an argument for engaging opponents (or enemies) and building broad coalitions, the campaign software often argued that volunteers should focus on motivating those who were already likely to support Obama. As we will see, the procedures for making phone calls to potential voters make the argument that volunteers should end the call if faced with a supporter of Hillary Clinton (during the primary) or John McCain (during the general election). And while the campaign argued that volunteers were organizing in a horizontal, distributed fashion, a closer look at its procedural rhetoric reveals that it also exercised a great deal of centralized control. We could read these contradictions as examples of how campaigning is different from governing, and this certainly explains part of the story. Politicians make promises, and those promises are often abandoned once the realities and complexities of legislation assert themselves. However, these complex and contradictory arguments also reveal something important about protocological power. The ability to argue simultaneously that the United States should engage enemies such as Iran and that volunteers should avoid any engagement with supporters of McCain or Clinton stems directly from the operations of protocological power. These tensions mirror the structural contradictions of the campaign, which was built on the tension between hierarchical power and distributed power. Making both of these arguments at once is much more than a cynical attempt to win office (although it may, in fact, be that). It is also an indication that citizens and digital rhetors should be aiming to be, in Annette Vee’s terms, “procedeurate,” cultivating tools for composing and understanding computational procedures. Becoming procedurate is part of preparing oneself to face up to the contradictions of networked life. Procedural rhetoric is one of these tools, and it is a particularly interesting one given that it was deployed by both the campaign and its volunteers. Procedural rhetoric’s insistence on the modeling of a worldview and on an interaction with that worldview means that it is both a tool for control and a tool for gaining insight into control. Becoming procedurate does not lead to a citizenry free from manipulation, but it could mean that procedural rhetoric is a particularly useful tool for civic engagement in networks. Through a closer look at the Obama campaign, we can begin to see how protocol operates and how procedural rhetoric offers ways to move through and reshape networks.
Political Rhetoric, Procedurality, and MyBarackObama.com

Many have argued that the 2008 Obama campaign signaled a significant shift in campaigning, and this suggests that a close analysis of its procedural rhetoric will be a crucial part of understanding contemporary, emerging political discourse. The Obama campaign’s MyBO website made procedural arguments about which kinds of volunteering activities were most important. The MyBO user’s home page featured an “activity index” that tracks a volunteer’s activities. A Facebook page called “Students for Barack Obama” explains the tracker:

The Activity Tracker helps Obama supporters measure the work they’re doing on behalf of the campaign. Whereas before, the points system tried to measure lots of different activities down to a “point value,” the new Activity Tracker simply displays up front exactly what activity users have been engaged in.

The activities that went into the calculation of this index were events hosted, events attended, phone calls made, doors knocked on, number of blog posts written, number of donations made to your personal fundraising group, amount of money raised, and number of groups joined. The site’s original mode of motivating volunteers involved assigning point values to certain activities. In an August 2007 blog post, Chris Hughes (a co-founder of Facebook) explained the points system:

Just about every action you can take on My.BarackObama now will give you points to make it easier to see all the hard work you’re putting in to make this campaign succeed. If you host an event, that’ll show up on your profile and you’ll get 20 points. Write a blog post and you’ll get 15.

While Hughes was insistent that “earning points isn’t what this campaign is about,” he did use the blog post to announce that hosts of “Barbeques for Barack” would earn 50 points and house party hosts would earn 100. By assigning higher values to particular activities and by publishing a list of those with the highest point totals, the campaign made procedural arguments about which campaign activities held the most value.

The existence of both the activity index and the point system might be seen as instances of “gamification,” a term that has caused a great deal of heated debate in many circles. Bogost has argued that the term is merely a cynical attempt by corporations to cash in on the success of videogames. His argument, which is similar to his critique of political games, is that ad-
vocates of gamification care little for the affordances of games and instead are out “to capitalize on a cultural moment, through services about which they have questionable expertise, to bring about results meant to last only long enough to pad their bank accounts before the next bullshit trend comes along.” He suggests the term “exploitationware” is a better descriptor of such practices. Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Nacke have argued that such heated debates should not discredit the study of gamification but that scholars might require a new term for the phenomenon. They define gamification as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts,” but they suggest the term “gameful design” as an alternative to those hoping to avoid the baggage of the term “gamification.” The term “gameful design” originates with Jane McGonigal, who, despite offering a number of critiques of gamification, is often put forward as a proponent of the concept. While McGonigal’s book *Reality Is Broken* does suggest that games can offer effective ways of solving social problems and motivating people, she sees gamification as a superficial attempt to dress things up as games. She hopes that gameful design can offer a more thoughtful approach: “Instead of thinking about the things that we can do to make something look like a game. ‘Oh, I see badges. I see levels. I see points. It must be a game.’ What can we do to make something feel like a game?” If we were to plug MyBO into this debate, we could categorize it in multiple ways: as a way to exploit volunteers, as a way to make an already “hip” campaign even hipper, or as an attempt to guide volunteers toward certain types of activities. My own approach will lean toward the latter, but it would be just as valid to analyze MyBO as a piece of exploitationware.

Cynical or not, exploitative or not, the MyBO site’s use of points and other metrics to measure volunteer activities was most certainly an attempt to control the efforts of its massive network. Discussions of gamification are central to any discussion of ethical programs, since the use of procedures to manipulate an audience would certainly fall within the realm of both rhetoric and ethics. However, I’m less concerned with categorizing MyBO’s effort in terms of gameful design than I am with tracking how the campaign used a range of artifacts to manage a distributed network of volunteers. While critics of gamification would focus on whether MyBO used game features in meaningful ways, it seems clear that volunteers were motivated by these features and that the site felt like a game to those atop the leaderboard. Most interesting for our purposes are the arguments forwarded by the MyBO system itself, which were somewhat contradictory. MyBO’s point system led game designer Gene Koo to proclaim it “one of the most important game titles of 2008,” but he also pointed out that the game tended to (perhaps unintentionally) devalue certain kinds of activities:
For example, in January, my partner and I drove down to South Carolina and spent a week in the trenches, eventually helping to run a staging location in a bellwether precinct. For this—and for our subsequent work in MA, VT, and PA, we scored a big fat zero, because there was no way to let MyBO know what [we] were doing. Meanwhile, others were apparently gaming the system by hosting bogus events or flipping through phone numbers without actually calling anyone, perhaps hoping to win various awards. (The site did limit the number of numbers it would give you within a specific period of time to limit this kind of abuse—or, I suppose, wholesale data-mining).46

The point system established by the Obama campaign made procedural arguments about what volunteers should do to contribute to the effort, and it inadvertently devalued certain activities “in the trenches.” On the other hand, one could argue that those operating “in the trenches” did not require a point system for motivation. Either way, the point system revealed important arguments about how the campaign hoped volunteers would allocate their time and resources.

When the point system was scrapped in favor of the “activity tracker” in August 2008, some of the point leaders were upset. But, as Koo notes, the activity tracker’s 1–10 scale allowed a great number of volunteers to feel like they were contributing. The first iteration of the point system was purely cumulative, and a leaderboard showed who had earned the most points. Koo argues that this was somewhat disconcerting to volunteers who logged in and saw that “there were 266,441 other people doing more work than you.”47 The new system made it clear that sustained and regular volunteer activities were valued. A volunteer could no longer rack up a large number of points and shoot up the leaderboard. Instead, she or he had to continue to carry out certain volunteer activities to keep the activity index from dropping. Hosting one-time events or spending a day making phone calls wouldn’t keep your index high forever. Competition was still part of this system, but it shifted. Rather than attempting to compete for point totals, volunteers were now encouraged to keep their activity index high. The index was published on a MyBO user’s profile page, meaning that volunteers could gauge one another’s commitment by visiting profiles and comparing activity index numbers. As Rahaf Harfoush, a community manager for MyBO, explains, users needed to continually contribute and to contribute in a variety of ways to keep their index up: “Even if you made 100 calls, if you didn’t do anything else for a while, your score would drop, motivating people to come back and do more campaign activities.”48

Both the activity index and the point system are perfect examples of procedural authorship. While the layout of the web page and the tools for or-
ganizing are worthy of our attention, this minor game-like feature of MyBO is an example of how procedures can express arguments. As Koo explains, the point system was probably a “curiosity” for most people, but it served an important rhetorical purpose: “the point system helped signal what kinds of activities really mattered, and it probably had something to do with the over 200,000 events hosted and 27,000 groups created on MyBO—an impressive number even after you discount some set of bogus ones put on to game the system.” The point system put forward important procedural arguments, specifically that certain activities are most important and that campaign volunteers best serve the cause by remaining involved.

But what might be most striking about the game-like structure of portions of the MyBO website is that it reveals how much the campaign exercised protocological control over volunteer activities. The campaign used this game to guide and funnel volunteers to particular activities at particular moments in the campaign while also encouraging individual empowerment and horizontal collaboration. Software expert Martin Fowler sees this as the true innovation of the Obama campaign: its ability to simultaneously deploy top-down and peer-to-peer structures. Fowler argues that the Dean campaign made use of peer-to-peer interaction but failed to combine this with a “mass-organization model.” The latter involves “direct contact from the campaign leadership to activists on the ground.” The mass-organization model is not a pure “command-and-control” model in which a clear hierarchy is in place. Rather, mass-organization cuts out the middle layers of bureaucracy. With a combination of peer-to-peer and mass-organization, the Obama campaign “directed activities from the center, but also encouraged peer-to-peer collaboration.” Fowler explains how the MyBO software enacts both of these models simultaneously:

Here’s an example of this fusion. An important part of the software for both the Dean and Obama campaigns is event planning software to help volunteers plan meetings. In the purely peer-to-peer mode a volunteer decides to have a meeting on a pressing topic, say health-care. They go to the event planner and enter a meeting date, time, place, topic, capacity etc. They can advertise it in the various social groups that they’ve set up in the system. Another volunteer who uses the same political website may see the meeting advertised in the online group, or might search for upcoming local meetings. The guest volunteer can then use event planning software to RSVP to the meeting, giving the host an idea of who’s coming. Weaving in the mass-organization model, the key difference is that the process can be kicked off by the campaign leadership. They can decide that they would like to see a coordinated push to discuss health care over the next couple
of weeks. So they suggest to volunteers that they may like to try and organize meetings around this. They may provide catalysts such as articles to read or DVDs to watch. This creates a buzz around the topic that makes it more likely that meetings get set up. This buzz reaches out to potential attendees as well who are now more likely to try and find local meetings on the topic.52

The MyBO site suggested a list of event types, and volunteers would choose their theme. A party might have been focused on making phone calls to neighbors, or it might have been a potluck in which volunteers gathered to discuss health-care policy. One example of the campaign’s use of themed parties was the organization of the “Unite for Change” events held around the country on June 28, 2008. These events were organized just weeks after Obama had clinched the Democratic Party’s nomination and one month before the Democratic National Convention. After a hard-fought primary, the Obama campaign was looking to unite the party and prepare for the general election. MyBO provided a “Host Guide” for the event that suggested procedures that hosts could carry out before, during, and after the event, a document that is striking given this book’s concerns with hospitality.53 Each organizer served as host, and the Obama campaign’s guide served as a kind of Emily Post–like document for those hosts. The hospitality of the campaign, which aimed to welcome more volunteers to the fold, was distributed to all of these nodes (individual homes, in this case) and was controlled by way of a protocol. The campaign suggested ways to promote the event and what the actual event might entail (literally, a protocol for the event), and it laid out a possible agenda for volunteer hosts. For instance, the guide suggested that hosts could show the campaign’s “Unite for Change” video and open up a discussion about the next stages of the campaign. The guide also provided links to customizable flyers and to sign-in sheets for guests. Sign-in sheets asked guests to provide phone numbers and addresses, and hosts were encouraged to gather these sheets and enter the information into the campaign’s database via a web interface on MyBO.

While the campaign suggested an agenda for these events—such as encouraging guests to stay involved in the campaign and asking guests to share what had inspired them to be active in the campaign—it insisted that this agenda was only a suggestion: “This agenda is meant only to be a suggestion to guide you in your activities. Feel free to organize your Unite for Change event according to your preferences.”54 Just as the activity index and point systems made procedural arguments that funneled volunteers to certain tasks, the Unite for Change host guide included procedures for gathering data about those in attendance and guiding discussion in certain directions. These procedures reveal that the events were less about explicit discussions
to unite supporters of Clinton and Obama and much more about one more effort to gather information about volunteers. While the title of the event and the video—Unite for Change—suggested that these events might offer former Clinton supporters (or perhaps even Republicans and independents) a “way in” to the campaign, the main goal of these events seemed to be to continue efforts to build a database of potential supporters. The seven-minute “Unite for Change” video was primarily about the value of community organizing and not about “uniting.” The procedural arguments of the campaign suggested that these events were about gathering data and recruiting volunteers, and this was the theme of most Obama volunteer events. The Unite for Change title was primarily just a new banner for hosts to hang up in front of the house.

MyBO didn’t only distribute talking points. It also laid out procedural arguments via its social networking site—suggesting themes, tasks, and sample agendas for meetings and parties. Procedural arguments allow for a kind of finessing between explicit instructions or directions (which would ostensibly offer little flexibility) and rhetorical engagement. The Obama campaign planted seeds for themed get-togethers and it used procedural arguments via documents such as the “host guide” and the activity index “game” in order to persuade supporters and volunteers to carry out particular kinds of activities. This does not make the campaign any less interesting, important, or (for some) inspiring. But a closer look at the procedural arguments forwarded by the MyBO campaign website allows us a full picture of the campaign’s arguments and motives. The arguments made by the activity index, the point system, and the “host guide” are examples of procedural expression. The campaign could have provided a ranked list of volunteer activities rather than a point system, but the choice to make these arguments procedurally meant that volunteers responded by interacting with the procedures. As we have seen, the Obama campaign was not averse to controlling activities from the center, and a ranked list would have been in line with the campaign’s hybrid strategy (fusing what Fowler calls “mass-organization” and “peer-to-peer”). By making such arguments procedurally, the Obama campaign took advantage of the massive network it had built, inviting volunteers to contribute while also carefully orchestrating activities via hierarchical structures. However, this was only half of the story when it comes to the procedural rhetorics of the Obama campaign.

Phone Banking: The Procedural Rhetoric of a Script

```php
boolean $supportObama;
boolean $volunteer;
```
If we were to convert an Obama campaign phone banking script to PHP programming code, it might look something like this. But this code is fictional in a number of ways. For one, it’s not operational. There are some statements missing, and we would need to create some additional files in order to make it run. Further, the phone-banking script (the procedure) authored by the Obama campaign is sometimes more involved than this short piece of code. The campaign’s scripts involved more questions, and they sometimes accounted for the undecided voter. If the potential voter was undecided, certain phone-banking scripts offered procedures for persuading that person to vote for Obama. These kinds of procedural arguments were used in swing states and during moments in the campaign when the Obama campaign thought that persuading undecided voters was a reasonable use of resources. However, much of the phone banking operation was about GOTV activities and about educating Obama supporters about how and when to vote.

In order to extend this program further and to truly depict the phone script as a program, we would have to include a number of instructions after the first “print” statement. In fact, the program might have included a number of nested if-then statements, and the caller would query the potential voter
(much like querying a database) for information. But my main purpose in including this bit of fictional PHP code is to make the point that the scripts given to Obama volunteers were procedural arguments and that they could have been written as computational artifacts. Understanding procedural arguments provides a window into a deeper understanding of software and how it is used to build arguments. We can write the phone-banking script in PHP code, and we can write MyBO software’s procedures in plain English. This translation work is important for understanding the arguments being made by the Obama campaign, and it is also important if we want citizens to cultivate a deeper, procedurate understanding of how software is used to make arguments.

Further, I want to make the point that the answer to the question that opens most of these phone calls—“Who do you plan on supporting in the upcoming election?”—will instantly determine how long the call will last and how involved the conversation will be. If the potential voter indicates that she or he is a McCain or Clinton supporter, the call may very well be over. The campaign volunteer is instructed to thank the person for his or her time and hang up the phone. Such a phone call is not a failure, from the perspective of the campaign, because it is now able to update its database to ensure that this particular person is not called again, resulting in the conservation of time and resources. If the potential voter is a strong Obama supporter (or, many cases, undecided), the procedure continues through a series of if-then statements. The caller asks questions, provides information about absentee ballots or polling locations, and sometimes even recruits a new volunteer. What is most interesting for our purposes is that many of the scripts provided by the campaign offer few instructions for how one might persuade a McCain or Clinton supporter to change his or her mind. The campaign’s procedural arguments often guided volunteers to politely bow out of rhetorical engagement with Clinton or McCain supporters. This was not always the case. Depending on the location of the potential voter, the circumstances of the election at the time of the call, or the target audience of the call, certain phone-banking procedures provided instructions for persuading those who were not already Obama supporters.

However, in many cases the procedures for attempting to persuade supporters of McCain or Clinton were authored not by the campaign but rather by the volunteers themselves. For instance, a Daily Kos blogger named Elise details a possible procedure for convincing Iowans to caucus for Obama:

An example:

JOE: Oh, I’m planning on voting for Edwards because he’s against the war.
ME: I completely understand your frustration (if that’s how they sound—or maybe anger? Depends on the call) with the war. Actually, this is one of the reasons I chose Obama over Edwards. I really like Senator Edwards, but did you know that he actually co-sponsored the resolution that gave President Bush the blank check to take us into war? Senator Edwards had a lapse in judgment here, and for me, it was an awfully large mistake. Senator Obama has been against the war since back in 2002 when he was running for Senate in Illinois.\textsuperscript{56}

Note that the procedure is contingent on the rhetorical situation. Elise’s parenthetical statement about how the caller “sounds” is a kind of “if-then” statement, a fork-in-the-road moment in the discussion where the caller decides which path might work best. Procedural arguments in the form of phone-banking scripts were distributed by the campaign, but Obama volunteers were not rigid, unswerving machines. They did not always execute the campaign’s code, or at least not in the way that we normally imagine the process of execution.\textsuperscript{57} They interpreted it, changed it, and made it their own. For instance, a volunteer by the name of “Renata Hussein Hussein” posted her thoughts about what does and doesn’t work when calling voters on her MyBO blog.\textsuperscript{58} That post not only details Renata’s thoughts about how to best approach the phone call script but also cites the recommendations of a volunteer named “Barath” who, in turn, had borrowed some ideas from “Dave C.” Dave explains that he has developed his own script that allows him to “just kind of vamp,” and he recounts his own attempt at procedural authorship. In order to combat the Clinton campaign’s arguments about Obama’s lack of experience, Dave experimented with a change to his script:

On Sunday I had thrown in a line saying that “Obama has the right kind of experience to address the challenges we have at home and abroad. Challenges like our economy, our health care system . . . etc.” I wanted to get at the heart of Clinton’s argument. Out of six or seven women, five that I spoke with were polite and were totally with me until I said that bit about experience, and then interrupted me and said they didn’t want to talk with me and hung up. It wasn’t happening with the guys.

I wondered if it was the new line? So I tried calls without it. I replaced it by saying that “I’m spending my time reaching out to my neighbors on Obama’s behalf because I believe that he’s the only candidate running in either party who can genuinely bring us together to get things done at home and abroad. I’m calling because I believe in him[.]”

It was a total 180. Suddenly, the women I [talked to] weren’t hanging up on me, and some were asking “why do you say that?” Boom. I was in.\textsuperscript{59}
Dave’s script tinkering is not evidence of a scientific study, and his assumptions may have been a bit hasty. Seven phone calls is not exactly a large sample size, and it is difficult to know whether the change in the script was truly more persuasive for women. Further, we have no real way of knowing whether the language of “experience” is what caused these potential callers to end the conversation. But what is most important, for our purposes, is Dave’s attempt at procedural argument. Yes, he changed the content of the script, and this would seem to fit within the realm of existing rhetorical theories about how language can be crafted to persuade particular audiences. But he also authored a new procedure. Crafting his own if-then statements, Dave worked through a new procedure. He shifted his script based on the audience, and engaged in procedural expression. In addition, he shared his script with other volunteers, and at least two others posted this story on their own blogs. The lesson of Dave C’s script may have persuaded others to adopt his language, and it may have convinced them to avoid the “experience” argument that he attempted to use (and which he decided was the reason for his failure). But Dave’s story also provided other volunteers with an example of procedural authorship, and it is evidence that the Obama campaign’s scripts served as loose templates for volunteers.

While the Obama phone-banking script is in fact an ethical program that manages relations between callers and potential voters, it is not an example of the campaign programming its volunteers. Instead, it is evidence that the campaign was authoring procedural arguments and that volunteers engaged with those procedural arguments by editing, revising, and extending the procedures provided by the campaign. We can read the Obama campaign’s scripts as expressions of certain arguments. The nested if-then statements of these scripts lay out an ethical program, they present arguments to volunteers about the best way to address a potential voter, they indicate who is worthy of attempts at persuasion, and they provide some instructions about how and when to distribute information (about polling locations, absentee ballots, and so forth). This is not quite the same as the “talking points” that campaigns and political parties often distribute. Talking points were provided, and they offered a kind of campaign brochure. Procedures manipulate the brochure content, rearrange it, or decide which content should be presented in particular rhetorical situations. In addition to editing or “remaking” the content of the Obama campaign’s arguments (this was happening as well), volunteers in phone banks were changing procedures based on the rhetorical situation.

And phone-banking scripts weren’t the only procedural arguments at work. The campaign also deployed a “letter to the editor” function on the website. While there was evidence that volunteers on the phone were adjusting the scripts to fit their rhetorical needs, the “letter to the editor” function
on MyBO resulted in rhetorically ineffective form letters. Fowler explains how this played out:

The “letter to the editor” feature helped supporters write letters to newspapers advocating a particular position. In use a supporter would search to find local newspapers for her area, and then get assistance to compose a letter to that newspaper. Early implementations of this feature included sample text to help [with] composing the letter, but this fell out of favor as it led to too many letters which obviously came from the same source. So later advice [came in the form of] a list of arguments to cover in the letter, to encourage writers to make a more individual expression.60

The new letter to the editor function offered volunteers the ability to write letters to the editor in support of health-care reform or other Obama administration policies. Users could choose an issue such as health-care reform and then were presented with an explanation of how their letter could help:

By writing a letter to the editor, you can help educate decision-makers and the public about the urgent need for reform. Remember, you don’t need to be an expert. We’ll provide information to get you started, but the most powerful message is your personal story about why health insurance reform is so urgent in your life and the lives of those you know.61

Rather than offering a form that users would complete, the software now explains that a “personal story” is more persuasive. After entering a zip code, the user is presented with a list of local and national newspapers along with each newspaper’s estimated circulation. This latter detail is important. The software could present other bits of information here, but it chooses to present circulation numbers. It persuades users to consider the size of the audience they would like to reach. After choosing a newspaper (users can choose more than one), the website offers a text box in which the writer can compose the letter. That text box is accompanied by a list of suggested talking points, but it is also accompanied by a link to “writing tips.” It is more than a little disconcerting that clicking on this link generates only two words of advice: “Be concise.”62 The procedural argument of the “letter to the editor” function makes it clear that the campaign wants volunteers to write to their local newspapers and that it wants them to make use of talking points while also including personal anecdotes. Again, centralized control (talking points) is accompanied by a volunteer’s freedom to express herself (personal stories).
The Ethical Programs of Networked Life

During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, candidate Obama was criticized for saying that he would meet with certain enemies of the United States “without precondition.” During a debate sponsored by CNN and YouTube, Obama said that he would be willing to meet with leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea:

The notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them—which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration—is ridiculous. Ronald Reagan constantly spoke to the Soviet Union at a time when he called them an evil empire. He understood that we may not trust them, and they may pose an extraordinary danger to this country, but we had the obligation to find areas where we can potentially move forward. And I think that it is a disgrace that we have not spoken to them.63

In addition to these arguments about engaging foreign enemies, Obama has often expressed admiration for Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book Team of Rivals, which details how President Abraham Lincoln was willing to fill his cabinet with people who had run against him.64 Indeed, as we know, Obama nominated one of his fiercest rivals, Hillary Clinton, to the post of secretary of state. During debates about health-care reform and financial reform, President Obama continually insisted upon this ethical program—that he was willing to listen to his opposition’s arguments. In addition, the Obama campaign also continually repeated the mantra of “Yes, we can.” Both volunteers and those outside the campaign understood this slogan as an expression of the campaign’s networked, grassroots structure. The Obama campaign presented itself as a peer-to-peer network, and candidate Obama often referred to volunteer organization efforts. He compared those efforts to his own previous experience as a community organizer, and these peer-to-peer activities were indeed happening. Neighbors were holding meetings and barbeques; volunteers were knocking on doors.

Whether or not these arguments are evidence of mere political posturing, the point I want to make is this: Obama continually positioned himself as someone willing to engage his opposition and positioned his campaign’s volunteer operation as a peer-to-peer network. However, a closer look at some of the procedural arguments made during the Democratic primary and the general election reveals a more complex and sometimes contradictory stance. From the MyBO website to the phone scripts provided to volunteers,
the Obama campaign’s position with regard to engaging with or attempting to persuade the opposition was not so clear cut. Obama’s speeches may have argued for a “big tent,” but the ethical programs of MyBO and the phone-banking scripts suggested something quite different—that volunteers bow out of rhetorical exchanges with the opposition.

In addition, we have seen that the campaign’s procedural arguments reveal a delicate dance between hierarchical control and peer-to-peer interaction. I offer this not as a way of debunking the campaign. Rather, I want to suggest that these conflicting arguments indicate that a deeper understanding of procedural rhetoric offers us new ways to understand all types of arguments, political and otherwise. But what is perhaps most interesting about the range of procedural arguments made by the campaign is that only a small number of them relied on computation. While the activity index and the point system used computational procedures to lay out a kind of “game space” for volunteers, many of the procedures discussed in this chapter did not rely on the computational power of a computer for expression. The campaign certainly used the encyclopedic and interactive affordances of computational technology to organize volunteers, but their use of procedures did not always make use of computational machines. In many ways, the campaign used digital technologies to distribute, rather than author, procedural arguments. A videogame uses the power of computation to create a procedural world that uses rules to expresses arguments; a phone-banking script, though it does deploy rules persuasively, does not necessarily require computer processors.

While these different noncomputational ethical programs might mean that the 2008 Obama campaign still doesn’t address Bogost’s concern that politicians have yet to truly tap the affordances of procedural rhetoric, a close examination of the campaign in terms of procedural arguments across media and situations is still useful. It presents a different lens through which to examine the campaign, and it links the concerns of software and computation to extradigital spaces. Further, it provides an ideal way to understand how the campaign organized itself, how it established and leveraged a protocological network, and how volunteers navigated that network. Procedural rhetoric was both a way to control volunteers and a way for volunteers to write back. Not all of these attempts by volunteers should be understood as resistance, and it is not my aim to present procedural rhetoric as the “magic bullet” for the manipulations of networked life. Instead, I am arguing that procedural authorship is both a method of controlling and reining in the complexities of the hospitable network and also a method by which we might act, argue, persuade, identify, and communicate in such networks.

As software becomes more and more prevalent, the cultivation of a procedural literacy becomes necessary. Close attention to the procedural rhetorics
at work in political arguments can reveal complex and contradictory messages about the ethical stances of politicians. In a political climate that values staying “on message” and controlling the narrative of a campaign, paying careful attention to procedural rhetorics can offer a glimpse of the range of arguments put forth by campaigns and of the methods by which they seek to control a distributed network of volunteers. But procedural arguments also invite interaction, and this allows us to read them as much more than manipulation or the covert programming of the polis. Procedural arguments do not lay all their cards on the table, and this could lead us to read them as “sneaky” or as propaganda. But procedural rhetoric also calls out for audience interaction, asking others to fill in the blanks. The Obama volunteers’ willingness to rewrite the campaign’s phone-banking script is evidence that such arguments open up a space for rhetorical exchange. That space is an uncertain one, and it is not necessarily a space of symmetrical exchange, but it does allow for rhetorical action in networks of control. Procedural rhetoric provides rhetors with a way to understand how power moves through networks and how they can sometimes exploit that power.

While such ethical programs could lead to manipulation, they also leave political campaigns open to a morphing message as audiences interact with (and, in some cases, author) procedures. As we have seen with the activity index and with phone-banking scripts, procedural arguments call for us to engage with them and to determine assumptions embedded within them. Game play and software use, like reading or listening to an argument, asks the audience to fill in the gaps. Through this interaction, citizens, activists, and rhetors can reflect on procedural arguments and can (in some cases) challenge them, refute them, or make them their own. This kind of interaction presents an opportunity for reimagining what political action looks like in a hospitable network.