

## Obama on Flickr

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Flickr offers an opportunity to look at the circulation and reception of images of Barack Obama, unmediated by the mainstream media, in print and online. I have taken a few of the most popular images from a search for 'Barack Obama' using Flickr's 'most interesting' category. While the 'most recent' and 'most relevant' categories are self-explanatory, 'most interesting' is not, but does appear to return results that are more weighted towards images that people have commented on, annotated with remarks left on areas of the image itself, and chosen as favourites. (As with many such sites, the algorithms that rank search results are kept secret by Flickr and frequently changed to prevent manipulation by users; and there is a good deal of speculation on the Flickr forums about what is considered 'interesting' by the search engine.)<sup>1</sup> The comments, in particular, allow an inroad into what a public—of photographic enthusiasts—think about the image of this highly image-conscious politician, and the extent to which they reflect in the making of photographs as well as their responses, the orthodoxies of the manufacturers of 'news'.



<sup>1</sup> Naturally, since the algorithm is altered and people are uploading images all the time, the 'most interesting' images of Obama change rapidly; I made my searches in early June 2009.

The White House has its own official Flickr photostream which shows casual, apparently documentary photographs of the President at work and play. The ‘most interesting’ images are of a different character, some being taken at rallies by photographers with no special access to Obama, some being of mural and poster depictions, and some homemade by photomontage or even Lego figures. The manufactured images, in paint and photomontage, play to the standard image of Obama, a low monumentalised view of the raised chin and eyes that seem to glimpse a bright future, a typical image of the visionary leader instantly familiar from regimes of all political stripes.



One very popular image of Obama (with 175 comments and 501 ‘faves’) shows him wearing a cowboy hat at a rally in Austin, Texas in 2003. It was taken by a professional photographer, and published in the press but also uploaded in high-resolution to Flickr, an act the photographer now regrets since he believes it led to loss of control over the image.<sup>2</sup>

The large majority of the comments on this image are brief, and praise the photographer, often with linked praise for Obama, and often during the election coupled with exhortatory phrases. The most succinct expression of the combination reads: ‘Great photo! Great man!’ A liking for the shot and a liking for Obama, and the opposite, overlap a great deal, and there are few commentators who choose to separate the two. Here is a flavour of some of the more sustained comments, positive and negative (I have reproduced them exactly as they were written):

Ah, the Marxist Cowboy!

Sorry, Mr. Obama.

Nothing will make someone who is not already a cowboy look \*less\* like a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mattwright/400394507/>

cowboy than putting on a cowboy hat.  
That's just the way it is. You poser.

I didn't know Barack was such a cowboy.  
Do you really think hes the Antichrist... I never thought of that, seems like such a charming guy, his speeches always make me have goosebumps.  
The cowboy hat is so American

Love the shot really. Its clearly a posed shot--Im absolutely positive he doesn't run around in a cowboy hat regularly--but he actually looks quite comfortable in it. (at least as comfortable as you can look in a cowboy hat). Its like the antithesis of the Dukakis/ tank picture.

That was a close call Obama, but you managed to come out unscathed. Hazzza!

He looks a lot like Chuck Norris' side kick in "Walker, Texas Ranger." I wonder how Obama would do in a street fight, got some kung fu moves?

Yeah right! Kinda like Dukakis in that tank.  
I bet he wears this as often as he does the flag pin.

There is a clearly partisan flavour to many of the comments, and the remark of one conservative that the picture reminded him of *Brokeback Mountain* caused considerable liberal reaction. The image is clearly discussed as a direct political intervention. There is little critical reflection on the cultural connotations of the cowboy hat, nor on its being worn by this particular candidate. The martial connotations of the cowboy hat are clearly brought out in these some of these comments, though not very reflexively. Naturally, the idea that it (along with the six-gun and other cowboy paraphernalia) may be seen by a proportion of the population with much the same horror as we may regard the double lightning flash of the SS never surfaces, let alone the link to the President's bombardment of brown-skinned folk in Afghan and Pakistani villages.

A very striking feature of the many comments made about this picture is that only one talks about the other photographers in the image (to say: 'of all the cameras in this pic, im sure this was the best shot.')

So while there is certainly awareness of the staginess of the photo-op, the character of celebrity, the urge to demand, make and consume images of such figures minute-by-minute, and the assumption that they bear meanings which are to be tussled over, become merely the invisible backdrop against which controversy is staged.

Another very popular photograph (271 comments, 588 faves), also taken at a rally, is titled using Obama's famous and vacuous rallying cry.

flickr

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## YES WE CAN



Sorry, comments are closed. Too many nut jobs leaving absurd comments on it.

Thanks for the outpouring of support on this photo! I had fun taking all of them. I do request that long comments and cut/paste comments containing President Obama's speeches not be posted as a comment to this photo. Love it, but you can go [here](#) to read his inaugural address.

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Taken at the [Barack Obama rally](#) in Pueblo, CO.

There were a few thousand people today in Pueblo to hear Senator Obama speak just a few days before the election.

I cried. Yes, I did.

I've been to thousands of rallies. I've been a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. I've shaken hands and spoken with lots of players in this game - Albright, Richardson, Reno, Salazar, Kucinich.

And all that stuff usually bores the hell out of me. The last time I was excited about a political campaign was when Bill Clinton won the election way back in 1992. We poured into Castro Street in San Francisco, 10s of 1000s of us, and celebrated - danced, parlied, kissed. I was part of the Colorado 13 -- 13 hold-out Kucinich delegates who refused to

Uploaded on November 1, 2008 by [zyrcster](#)

zyrcster's photostream

2,500 uploads

This photo also belongs to:

Most Interesting (Set)

You are at the first photo. 50 items

Barack Obama Rally in Pueblo, Colorado (Set)

You are at the first photo. 25 items

Part of Colorado

Colorado Springs (Pool)

click! photography changes everything (Pool)

Tags

- Barack Obama
- Obama Rally
- Pueblo
- Colorado
- Democrats
- election08
- campaign
- Yes we can
- PFOGold
- PhotoFaceOffPlatinum

Additional Information

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Anyone can see this photo

The photographer posts:

Barack is my man.

I'm all about free speech, peeps, but I already voted and I voted for Barack Obama. If anyone else wants to convince me to vote for someone else, well, that's not going to happen. :)

So, yea, comments containing photos of McCain/Palin will get deleted from this photo. I really don't care to see them in my stream. Go knock on some doors of the people who haven't voted yet instead.

Again, this image elicits a combination of praise for the photograph and the candidate, the two rarely distinguished:

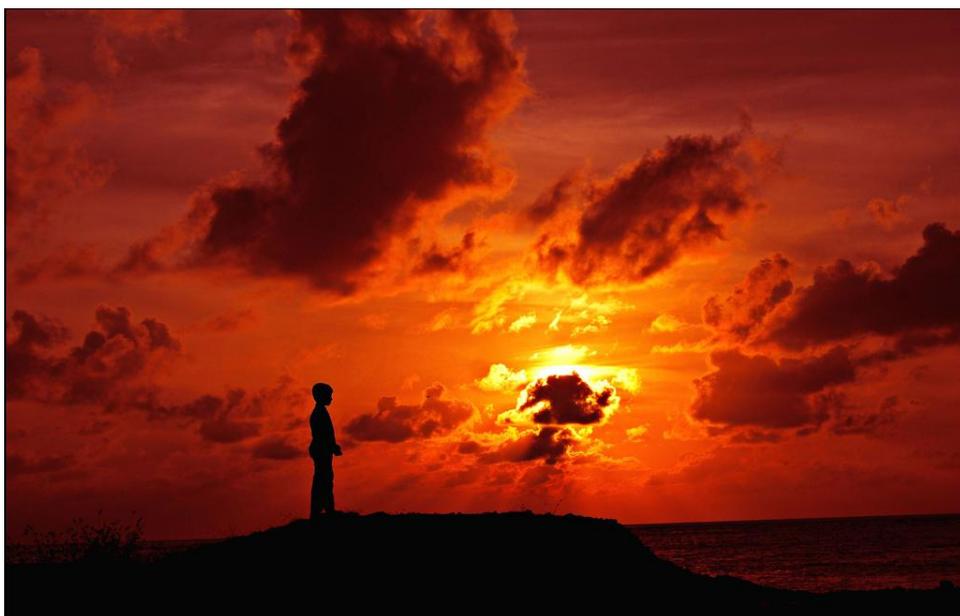
This is a beautiful portrait! I don't know why I hadn't noticed it before - not only a great man, but can I comment on the technical aspects of the photo? You \*nailed\* the focus, the exposure, the moment. Really well done!

The circulation of the image is the subject of many comments (and of course comments themselves often include images), and this one becomes the raw material for a reworking:

Here's how I utilized your wonderful image, in honor of both the Dr. Martin Luther Holiday, and Inauguration Day for my desktop wallpaper. Thanks for sharing your talented photography skills!



Here, however, the photographer not only censors negative images but eventually closes the image to further comments because too many 'nutjobs' were posting. Again, aside from praise for the technical accomplishment, there is little comment on the qualities of the image as such (even in the notes which can be added to specific portions of the photograph, and are potentially an excellent tool for highlighting its particular characteristics). While the viewpoint here is low, Obama looks down, not up, presumably at the adoring crowd below, and bestows on them the blessing of his smile. The image relies for its effect on the charisma of its subject and the restriction and harmony of its colours, and once again on its readymade familiarity, for if the great leader does not stare into the future, he is often seen gazing downwards paternally at his charges.



Another image, this time of a boy against a sunset, but given an extended caption from a speech by Obama, which ends ‘we are choosing hope over fear’, garners many comments and faves (325 and 1,027 respectively). Here the comments are mostly about the qualities of the image, particularly the colours and the composition, though plenty also comment on the way the speech and the photograph complement one another:

Stunning, Very Moving image !! Gorgeous colors & tones ! Magnificent sky ! Fabulous cloud formations ! Breathtaking light & shadows ! Beautiful silhouettes ! Splendid movement & tones in the water ! Great reflection on the water ! Excellent composition , capture & clarity ! A Captivating & thought provoking image of Majestic Beauty !! Superbly, Well Done !!! Obama's speech is a Perfect compliment here !!! Both are Brilliant !!!

A visually inspirational image that matches the inspiration message from President-elect Obama. Hope is not only the bedrock of a nation, it is indeed the foundation of everything worth pursuing.  
Brilliant photo, brilliant message !!!

Most of the comments here are brief and very positive, and unlike those about photographs of Obama himself, do not contain much controversy, despite one or two pleas to keep politics out of photography, and one commentator that warns that Obama is the Antichrist. Here a relatively anodyne statement by Obama meets a competent but remarkably clichéd image of amateur photography (the child meets the sunset), and the commentary produced is overwhelmingly of a one-line or even one-word (‘Wow!’) character, that shows no debate or development.

Generally, much of the commentary on the popular Obama images is brief and simple. It reflects, in its ardent attachment to either side, the divisive character of the election itself. There is in places some very detailed political discussion—and occasionally it is extended and even respectful of the opposing view, though there also laments about the prevalence of insults and flaming—but it is focused on politics alone, and not on the images themselves, and certainly not on the intersection between the two. As we have seen, there is often great sensitivity to perceived slights, passionate rebuttals, and considerable censorship exercised by the page’s hosts (this is in addition to that exercised by Flickr itself).

The photographs of Obama are a co-operation between the photographer and the Obama PR machine, which has arranged his dress, coached him in pose and expression, and set up suitable backgrounds and venues. The authorship of these images lies between the photographer, the PR people and Obama himself. This remains unacknowledged, though it is visible in the way the comments insistently merge judgements about the politician and his image. The cult of the exceptional image is built into the very fabric of Flickr, and generally embraced by its members, so the idea that such images may be significant not for their individual qualities (and those of the individuals who make them) but as part of an industrial outpouring of celebrity images, made by amateurs and professionals alike, cannot be ventured.

The brevity and simplicity of the comments appear to confirm the view that photography is usually looked at rapidly, gutted for some familiar narrative or message, and then abandoned—perhaps for the next image. This is, surprisingly, also true of the

photographic enthusiasts and political partisans who inhabit Flickr, though they do occasionally make technical comments or ask about the focal length of the lens used or how an image has been modified. Yet, for the most part, there is a transparent unity of the image and the subject which rebounds to the glory or denigration of each.