

The Digital Presidency: How Technology Is Transforming Politics

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JOMC 713-The Global Impact of New Communication Technologies

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December 2008

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Introduction:

Thomas Jefferson used newspapers to win the presidency. Franklin Roosevelt was known for his radio “Fireside Chats.” Following his debates with Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy became known as the “television president.” Ronald Reagan – a former actor – was at home in front of the camera and became the first “big screen president.” But President-elect Barack Obama may go down in history as the first president who truly understood how to use the Internet to foster a sense of connection with citizens and to dispense with ordinary ways of governing.

Many writers, journalists and technology experts agree that the Internet played a major role in helping the little known senator from Illinois defeat New York Senator Hillary Clinton in the primaries and ultimately win the 2008 U.S. presidential race over Arizona Senator John McCain.

Background/Thesis:

Sources from the *Rocky Mountain News* and *The Huffington Post* say that Obama made use of [YouTube](#) videos and social networking sites such as [Facebook](#) – neither of which existed four years ago.

“In this election, it was very clear that the Internet was a major force in helping Barack Obama win. Without it, he likely would not have secured the nomination or the presidency,” according to Sarah Granger of *The Huffington Post* (Granger, November 5, 2008).

The campaign was successful in segmenting its supporters. For many older voters, short, concise emails worked. For the younger set, text messages were the order of the day. Some three million supporters received a text message announcing that Delaware Senator Joe Biden would be Obama’s running mate. While Obama was not the first candidate to use the Internet – Howard Dean used it in 2003 to raise money for his presidential campaign and Republican candidates Ron Paul and John McCain used it during the 2008 election – Obama was able to bridge the gap between online and ground level activism. His inspiring message of change resonated perfectly with the openness of the Internet and his message rippled out across the country and world, creating a huge wave. Part of Obama’s success is attributed to the fact that supporters were able to make donations in both small and large amounts through his website, enabling him to raise \$650 million (Granger, November 5, 2008).

This paper will explore how Obama harnessed the power of technology to secure his place in history as the United States’ first president of African-American descent, as well as what Obama did differently from other presidential candidates who used the Internet. Since the President-elect also plans to conduct some governmental business in cyberspace, both the benefits and the risks of such a move will be explored.

A Useful Strategy

According to FastCompany magazine, both John McCain and Barack Obama used the Internet, but Obama was able to leverage its effectiveness. When a prospective voter visited the candidates' websites, a "cookie" or Internet tag was placed in that user's web browser. The cookie could then identify the types of sites the user visited afterwards, helping inform which political ads were served up to the user. Because of the long and highly-publicized Democratic primary season, Obama's website received more hits, making his online behavioral targeting more effective. A distinctive site and social network known as MyBarackObama.com was created and Obama's team used Facebook, MySpace and YouTube to communicate with young voters. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, it is impossible to say whether or not use of the Internet contributed to a higher voter turnout, but his campaign integrated politics into everyday life. Fund-raising, social networking and volunteer mobilization became one seamless operation (Dannen 2008).

Further research shows that the Obama campaign developed an extremely interactive website early in the race. Caroline Dedas, a Ph.D student in the English Department of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, researched the campaign websites of Obama, McCain and Republican candidate Mitt Romney. Based on in-depth research conducted between April 2007 and January 2008, Dedas rated Obama's site as "robust" in its approach to civic participation, while the McCain site was rated as "moderate" and the Romney site was rated as "superficial." While all three candidates aimed to create a feedback loop of some sort, Dedas believed Obama did a better job because he enabled and encouraged users to engage in multiple activities such as organizing events and get-togethers in their own community, blogging and "speaking their minds" through written text, uploading a video or recording a message.

The McCain website did give space for dissenting opinions and also surveyed supporters on various issues, such as pork barrel spending. Dedas' research revealed that the McCain website did give users various options to participate, but their options were limited. For example, users voices were limited to poll and checklist formats and the site seemed reluctant to allow users to produce their own videos or other forms of technology. Romney's website - according to Dedas' research - showed brief summaries of the candidates' position on various issues, but didn't give users much of an opportunity to engage themselves in the campaign. For example, Romney's campaign didn't offer users the option to create their own webpage - they were only offered the option of making the Romney site their home page. Dedas' research further showed that Romney's site gave a "groomed image of the candidate" but allowed minimal participation. Romney did offer users a discussion forum underneath photos of his sons' day on the campaign trail, but Dedas noted that users tended to make comments such as "what a beautiful family," or "keep up the good work," rather than addressing the issues. Dedas believed the site offered little more than what viewers would see on television (Dedas 2008).

Other researchers and writers noted that McCain's campaign offered voters the opportunity to participate, but not at the level Obama did. While many of McCain's supporters weren't necessarily the type to use YouTube and Facebook, the Arizona Senator was able to effectively use the Internet to generate media attention through a series of videos posted on YouTube and his campaign website. But Julie Barko Germany

of George Washington University's Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, believes Obama's campaign "married" technology by integrating online videos, emails and text messages with face-to-face visits by volunteers.

More than 3 million donors gave money online, and those funds helped Obama beat John McCain with on-the-ground organizing and over-the-air advertising. The benefits of this type of campaigning have extended beyond the election. In a feature article for the Springfield, Illinois *State Journal-Register*, journalists and authors Cokie and Steve Roberts write that contributors changed the way they thought about elections and themselves. Voters turned from passive recipients of information to active organizers, broadcasters and fund raisers (Roberts 2008). All across the country, from large cities to small towns, people formed groups in support of Obama. Mike McCurry, a former press secretary to President Bill Clinton, believes the Internet is now becoming the new way voters communicate with each other and for many the Internet has replaced the campaign rally or has become the town center (McCurry 2008). The Pew Foundation reports that 39 percent of voters have watched a campaign video online and that five million people turned to the Internet to watch replays of President-elect Obama's 37-minute race relations speech (Smith, A. & Rainie 2008).

Of course not all political videos were created by the Obama and McCain campaigns. There were as many as one billion views of videos created by ordinary Americans not associated with either campaign. One of the most popular non-campaign videos was "[Dear Mr. Obama,](#)" a video created by an Iraqi War veteran who supported McCain and who delivered a message to Obama: "Dear Mr. Obama, having spent 12 months in Iraq theatre, I can promise you this is not a mistake." *U.S. News & World Report* says this video received about 13 million views. Other professional-looking videos became hits too. One of these was called "[I Got a Crush ...on Obama.](#)" There was also a video titled "[Will.I.Am's 'Yes We Can'](#)" music video that featured a few actors and musicians singing and rapping to an Obama speech. This video received about 12.7 million views. Viewers could easily pass the video on to their friends and family.

A Smooth Transition

The Obama team didn't waste time after the election. A new site – [change.gov](#) – the Office of the President-elect – was up and running almost immediately. This site enables viewers to learn more about the transition to the new administration, apply for jobs and submit their own stories and ideas. According to Terry Mancour of London's *Guardian* newspaper, traffic on [change.gov](#) is heavy. Mancour believes that the Obama team wants to "cement the electoral mandate with continued citizen participation." Obama is proposing a five-day online comment period before signing non-emergency legislation, enabling ordinary citizens to have input after their representatives have made the law (Mancour). While several members of Congress have had blogs enabling citizens to speak out on different types of legislation, no American president has ever done so. Obama even pledges to appoint a chief technology officer for the United States – possibly at the Cabinet level - and to create a program to bring broadband Internet to rural areas of the country. He's the first U.S. president to request a laptop computer for the Oval Office and plans to use technologies such as [Skype](#), a software that enables users to make telephone calls over the Internet. Obama also wants to turn the president's weekly radio

address into a multi-media product aired on YouTube as well as radio. Additionally, the administration is planning to produce streaming portions of Cabinet meetings live on the Internet. Will these productions be Obama's 24-7 version of "Fireside Chats?"

The Future: Challenges and Opportunities

As with any new endeavor, there will be both opportunities as well as problems. Both the McCain and Obama campaign websites were hacked. *Newsweek* magazine says that during the summer of 2008, technology experts detected what they initially thought was a computer virus at Obama headquarters—a case of "phishing," a form of hacking often employed to steal passwords or credit-card numbers. By the next day, both the FBI and the Secret Service warned campaign staffers that they had major problems and that a large number of computer files had been loaded off their system. Obama campaign chief David Plouffe heard the same information from White House chief of staff Josh Bolten. The federal agents told Obama's aides in late August that the McCain campaign's computer system had also been compromised. A top McCain official confirmed this information, *Newsweek* said. Officials at the FBI and the White House told the Obama campaign that they believed a foreign entity or organization sought to gather information on both candidates policy positions—information that might be useful in negotiations with a future administration. The federal officials assured the Obama team that it had not been hacked by its political opponents. A security firm retained by the Obama campaign took steps to secure its computer system and end the intrusion (*Newsweek* 2008).

President-elect Obama's new website, which reportedly will contain a search engine and other tools to make easy online trafficking of federal grants, contracts and earmarks, will be just as vulnerable to viruses, spam, illegal trafficking and hackers. The international terrorist network, Al-Qaeda, as well as any number of foreign organizations, could try to gain access to information on the White House site.

Asking ordinary citizens for input on pending legislation is a revolutionary idea. It is obvious that the new president-elect trusts average, ordinary Americans. This concept will allow Americans to feel as though Washington cares about them, and governmental processes stand to be more transparent than any time in history. But carrying out such a novel idea will require a large, well-trained staff, since the president can't possibly have enough time to read and respond to all comments. Then there are those who will comment on proposed legislation and won't be satisfied with the president's vote. These discontented folks will clog the website with their angry comments. The president's dealing with the press may change as well. During the campaign, Obama held few press conferences and sometimes remained aloof toward reporters, all while managing to win the presidency. As president, Obama may bypass the media and pressure Congress to adopt his programs. Will doing so endear him to citizens or will it endanger his presidency?

The Obama administration will also have to deal with Republicans who realize their party needs to be more high tech. A new coalition of Republicans have created a website called rebuildtheparty.com. They are calling for members of the GOP to band together and insist that the Republican National Committee make winning the technology war its number one priority during the next four years. If the Republicans come up with

innovative strategies, the Obama administration will have to find a way to compete well before the 2012 election.

Yet another issue that will have to be dealt with is the digital divide. While many Americans have reliable Internet access, cell phones and wireless handheld devices, still others don't have it or don't want it. The Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007 reported that there is a growing digital divide across America. The Pew study surveyed 4,001 adults 18 and older and found that 31 percent consider themselves "elite tech users." This means they are heavy and frequent users of the Internet, cell phones and, to varying degrees, are engaged with user-generated content. Of this 31 percent, another 8 percent are considered "omnivores," meaning that they have the most information gadgets and services and use them voraciously. This group tended to be under the age of 30. Another 20 percent of Americans considered themselves "middle-of-the-road" tech users, while almost half – 49 percent – have "few tech assets." Some in this group have modern technology at or near the periphery of their lives and find it useful. Others don't find it useful or don't have access to it and stick to television and land line telephones. Not surprisingly, most in this group are older (Smith, A. & Rainie 2008).

While reaching the 49 percent with few tech assets will be challenging for the Obama administration, it also represents an opportunity. At their change.gov website, Obama and Biden say they "understand the immense transformative power of technology and innovation and how they can improve the lives of Americans." They want to work toward the "full and free exchange of information through an open Internet and use technology to create a more transparent and connected democracy." Obama and Biden want to expand the modern communications infrastructure into every community in America through reform of the Universal Service Fund, promotion of next-generation facilities and applications, and new tax and loan incentives.

Another challenge the administration will have to deal with is control – or in some instances – a lack of control over the president's image. During the 2008 campaign, a great deal of incorrect or sometimes unsubstantiated information surfaced on the Internet. For instance, there were rumors that Obama is a Muslim who had a close relationship with former anti-Vietnam War radical William Ayers. There were also rumors that Obama was not an American citizen and was actually born in Africa instead of Hawaii. Research on factcheck.org, a nonpartisan project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, shows that there is no proof that any of these rumors are true. The administration's technology officer and staff will have to come up with new strategies to deal with new rumors that will invariably surface after Obama takes office.

Finally, will President Obama himself be able to be an active participant or will he have to rely on staff to do his emailing and other digital tasks? As of this writing, there are news reports saying Obama will have to surrender his Blackberry and will not be able to have a personal email account due to security reasons (Zeleny 2008). Since he reportedly is addicted to his Blackberry, surrendering it won't be easy.

Analysis and Solutions:

Considering the 2008 election only occurred a few weeks ago, there is a wealth of information concerning the digital presidency. While a great deal of information is found on blogs, mainstream news agencies, magazines and scholarly articles are addressing the

subject as well. Barack Obama did indeed win the presidency by making optimum use of technology, but if he wants to succeed at being America's first digital president, he has a daunting task ahead of him. Obama will be dealing with a shaky global economy, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, environmental and energy problems, rising healthcare costs and an uneasy American public with high expectations.

In order to succeed at being a truly connecting with the American people, Obama needs to do several things:

- Realize that MyBarackObama the public will have direct, unfiltered access to the administration's priorities and positions
- Make press conferences, addresses, signing ceremonies, etc. available online
- Work with Republicans and independents
- In addition to working with Republicans and independents, reach out to the many "anti-Obama" groups and hear their opinions
- Continue, if possible, to have a presence on MySpace and Facebook
- Incorporate opinion polls into the administration's website and social networking sites
- Make sure that it is easy for the public to give suggestions and feedback and have enough staff to respond to queries
- Use social networking sites to give people ideas on ways to serve their own communities
- Realize that the Internet is not owned by the government and that rumors will abound. Be prepared to deal with the negative information
- Since the digital presidency is a new concept, be open to suggestions for improvement and change

Conclusion:

Election 2008 fundamentally revolutionized how we do politics. Barack Obama's campaign was the most technologically sophisticated in history. As a result of these advances in the election process, Americans and the Obama administration have the opportunity to have a true democracy. In order for the digital presidency to succeed, however, President Obama will need to realize that the public – and young people in particular – have very high expectations of his administration. If he doesn't follow through on his campaign promises of transparency and a more efficient government, those who elected him – particularly younger voters – will become disillusioned and apathetic. In turn, Americans need to continue to play an active role in the process. Their role doesn't end on Election Day. As President John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country." (Kennedy, January 20, 1963)

If the Obama administration and the public do their part, America truly can have "government of the people, by the people and for the people." (Lincoln, November 19, 1863). If not, we will continue to have more of the same unaccountable, hidden politics and failed policies of previous decades.

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