

# ***Election 2008 – It's a Wrap***

Election 2008 witnessed many firsts, including the first African-American candidate to win the nomination of a major political party and ultimately the national election and the first serious woman candidate who became the candidate to beat — for a while.



***Along the way,*** we witnessed the largest fundraising numbers ever seen in any presidential campaign — some \$600 million in campaign donations. Barack Obama's success depended in great part on the creative and innovative use of the internet and Web 2.0 technologies. He used digital tools to tap into the untapped pool of small donors who participated in the election and contributed amounts less than \$100. Chris Anderson's long tail theory seems to apply to politics as well as economics. There are many more \$50–\$100 donors than \$100,000 power brokers. While it might take longer to reach \$1 million with small donations, it really did work in this case. Of Barack Obama's \$600 million, \$500 million came from online donors; the average online donation was \$80 [[http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/11/20/obama\\_raised\\_half\\_a\\_billion\\_on.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html)]. The long tail indeed. ➡➡

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Future candidates regardless of the office they seek — presidential, congressional, state, or local — will utilize the internet and Web 2.0 tools as a fundamental and essential part of their campaign strategy. The 2008 presidential election saw all presidential candidates use the internet — through the use of websites, blogs, fundraising, community building, videos, podcasts, social networking tools, and Twitter [<http://www.twitter.com>]. Clearly, not all candidates used the web as effectively as others, but it is hard to imagine any future candidates ignoring the important, if not vital, place the internet will play in campaign strategies.

In 2008, some candidates were more successful in implementing a strategy which took advantage of the strengths of the internet and the complete range of tools available to reach far and wide. For example, Ron Paul's campaign used the internet in particularly creative and interesting ways to tap into a passionate and motivated segment of the voting public who embraced his ideas and vision for America. Even so, candidates and campaign managers are still trying to figure out how to use the internet to craft an effective strategy that will lead them to successful victory at the ballot box. Having looked at the overall importance of the internet in the 2008 presidential election throughout this series, this concluding piece will examine the effective internet strategy that led Barack Obama to become the first internet president.

The impressive fundraising numbers, however, represent only one component of the role the internet and web technologies played in the 2008 election. Politics, elections, and, hopefully, the way we govern have changed forever.

## How Did They Do It?

Several years ago, *TIME* magazine awarded its person of the year to "US" (*"TIME's Person of the Year: You"* [<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>], Dec. 13, 2006). Obama and his team understood the core principles of Web 2.0 and used them effectively to run a campaign for the presidency. The American people were tired and fed up with the traditional model of political campaigns — a one-way, noninteractive, noncollaborative, "You Vote, We Rule" paradigm. This pattern for representative democracy has been soundly rejected, because it no longer works. Not in the age of the internet and Web 2.0 technologies.

What are the core principles of Web 2.0? It's about collaboration, it's about conversation and dialogue, it's about communication and community, it's about participation and engagement.



Barack Obama's Facebook page

Bottom line: It's not about any one individual, it's about all of us. Web 2.0 tools allow anyone to contribute ideas by creating his or her own content via blogs, comments, and wikis. We can broadcast our ideas via video uploaded to YouTube or Current TV. It's about meeting and sharing our ideas with friends, colleagues, and family via social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and MyBarackObama.

The 20th-century broadcast model of democracy, built on mass media formats such as television and radio, encouraged passivity by citizens. It did not allow or encourage debate, conversation, or dialogue between candidates and citizens. Television enabled candidates to raise money and then, once elected, ignore the voting public's concerns until the next election cycle, when new monies would be needed to be re-elected (Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason*, 2007). The 2008 presidential election showed the end of the broadcast model of democracy.

The language and words of the 2008 election dramatically showcased the importance of Web 2.0 and the integral role these technologies served in shaping the outcome of the presidential election:

- Citizen involvement
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Conversation/dialogue
- Customization/personalization
- Democratization of content
- On demand
- Participatory
- Responsive

Let's take a look at how these ideas mapped to the technologies. Barack Obama and his team combined internal social networking tools such as MyBarackObama and exter-

nal social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace to organize citizens from around the country. The Obama campaign tapped into the need to get involved — to participate and collaborate in the campaign. They created tools that allowed supporters to reach out to other supporters (or potential supporters), to build their own fundraising pages, create their own blogs, post to blogs, and create their own social networking site within MyBarackObama (President Obama, Please Get FISA Right [<http://my.barackobama.com/page/group/SenatorObama-PleaseVoteAgainstFISA>]). Groups could engage with different groups and build communities or organize events in their own neighborhoods. It also allowed people to track monies raised for the campaign.

By making the tools easy-to-use and encouraging involvement and participation, the campaign tapped into a huge wellspring of people-powered democracy. On MyBarackObama.com, 2 million profiles were created, 200,000 offline events planned, about 400,000 blog posts written, and more than 35,000 volunteer groups created. But that's not all. An additional 5 million supporters used other social networking sites to follow and engage with the campaign. In total, the Obama campaign maintained profiles in more than 15 online sites including Eons [<http://www.eons.com>] (a social networking site for Baby Boomers), BlackPlanet [<http://www.blackplanet.com/home>] (an online community for African Americans), FaithBase [<http://www.faithbase.com>] (churchgoers), Glee (gay, lesbian, and everyone else), MiGente [<http://www.migente.com>] (Latinos), MyBatanga (Latino music/entertainment), and Asian Ave [<http://www.asianave.com>] (Asian Americans) (Jose Antonio Vargas, "Obama Raised Half a Billion Online" [[http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/11/20/obama\\_raised\\_half\\_a\\_billion\\_on.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html)], Nov. 20, 2008).

Why this proliferation? Why create profiles on so many different sites? Scott Goodstein, Obama's D.C.-based campaign manager, put it this way: "The goal for us was to make sure that we were providing people information on all of these different social networks, so that if they never came directly to our website or signed up for our e-mail list, they still knew that the campaign was reaching out to them" ("Barack Obama's Text Message Guru Talks to the Ticket — Pt. I," *LA Times* [<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2009/01/obama-chief-tec.html#more>], Jan. 1, 2009).

To communicate with supporters, the Obama campaign used email, text messaging, and Twitter. The team sent out focused and personalized messages. It asked supporters to choose the most important issues to them and their local community. Email



EONS



Twitter

messages could then be targeted and customized to each supporter — based on where they lived and the issues most relevant to them. Scorecard: 13 million email addresses, 7,000 different messages, and more than 1 billion emails sent to inboxes across the world (Vargas, “Obama Raised Half a Billion Online”).

There is one problem campaigns have with email, however. If people are away from their computers, they may miss the email notifying them that a new rally, event, or fundraiser is happening in their community. To fill that gap, the Obama team turned to mobile tools, such as text messaging and Twitter, to reach and stay in constant communication with supporters. Now, we all know text messaging costs money; even with unlimited plans, the recipient has to pay for the text message. Regard-

less, more than a million people signed up for the campaign’s text messaging option. The campaign asked supporters to provide ZIP code information and designate the kind of message they wished to receive. All messages were then personalized and targeted to the individual supporter.

Twitter, a microblogging service and social networking site, allows people to send text messages from their cell phones, PDAs, and BlackBerries to friends, colleagues, family, and supporters. The Obama campaign set up a Twitter account and encouraged supporters to follow him; Obama then turned around and signed up to follow his supporters. What message does that send to the millions of people who followed his campaign? Of course he can’t read all the “Tweets,” but it sends the message that he is using Twitter to connect with, listen to, and converse with his supporters. According to Twitterholic, even after the election, Obama still had the most followers and friends, with some 165,000-plus followers [<http://twitterholic.com/BarackObama>]. The next closest is Kevin Rose, founder of Digg, with 86,000-plus followers.

## Video Too

Video also played a starring role in the Obama campaign. Go to BarackTV [<http://www.barackobama.com/tv>] and view all the videos put up by the campaign. Not interested in watching the videos on the campaign’s website? Not to worry, the campaign also posted videos to YouTube — some 1,650 videos and 14,548,809.5 hours of video viewing by users. (In comparison, John McCain’s videos received only 488,093.01 hours of viewers’ time.) Micah Sifry, co-founder of Personal Democracy Forum [<http://www.personaldemocracy.com>] and TechPresident [<http://www.techpresident.com>], reported, “The YouTube platform has been a huge tool for distributing the campaigns’ video messages” [[http://www.techpresident.com/blog/entry/32071/how\\_much\\_is\\_youtube\\_worth\\_to\\_obama\\_and\\_mccain](http://www.techpresident.com/blog/entry/32071/how_much_is_youtube_worth_to_obama_and_mccain)].

The effect of using YouTube to distribute and disseminate ideas, issues, policy positions, and to correct inaccurate information meant the Obama campaign could control its message, bypass mainstream media, and connect directly to supporters, potential supporters, and anyone interested in learning more about the candidate and his beliefs. They posted video all the time and sent out email and text messages alerting supporters about new video postings.

Who watched these videos? You might think the Net Generation could claim a monopoly on watching Obama videos, but the campaign learned otherwise. The majority of viewers were

aged 45 to 55. What did they watch? The longer speeches, the unscripted moments. The days of the sound byte are over. Now, if you miss an important speech, you can go to YouTube to watch the whole thing and then make your own decision on the quality and content of the candidate's speech or statement. Broadcast democracy no longer works.

How many of you watched Obama's compelling and courageous speech on race on March 18, 2008 ("A More Perfect Union" [<http://hk.youtube.com/watch?v=pWe7wTVbLUJU>])? You were not alone; in the first 24 hours after the speech, YouTube reported that the speech drew more than 1.2 million views. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press claimed that "Barack Obama's March 18th speech on race and politics is arguably the biggest political event of the campaign so far. Fully 85% of Americans say they heard at least a little about Obama's speech, and most (54%) say they heard a lot about it" [<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/777/obama-wright-news-interest>].

But the Obama campaign was not alone in posting videos to YouTube. American citizens uploaded their own videos to YouTube and let others view, comment, and share with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. How many of you have seen Black Eyed Peas member will.i.am's video "Yes We Can" [<http://hk.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>]? This collaborative video, based on the words of Obama's concession speech in the New Hampshire primary in February 2008, "features Barack Obama's image in collage fashion; the performers (celebrities including musicians, singers and actors) echo his words in a hip-hop call-and-response manner as his voice plays in the background" [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yes\\_We\\_Can](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yes_We_Can)]. The Obama campaign had nothing to do with this video. The video, the idea to put it together, came entirely from will.i.am. In a little less than 2 months, more than 17 million people watched the video (Don Tapscott, "Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing the World," p. 253). This video, if nothing else, epitomizes Web 2.0: "Yes we can."

The 2008 election also saw the rise of another set of terms and core beliefs that move beyond the campaign and the election and how, we, as a nation, might govern ourselves in the future. Web 2.0 technologies can make our government, our political leaders, and our culture more accessible, accountable, and transparent.

## What Do We Want From Our Government?

We want accessible and transparent government, where citizens can find government information and use it in ways never

seen before. Government information can be hard to find and even harder to use. Digital tools can greatly enhance how we find information and how we then use that information to make good policy decisions. We have seen the rise of many advocacy groups and nonprofits who actively promote the use of digital tools to make government information more accessible. We have explored in earlier articles in this series the fine work of Vote-Smart.org, the SunLight Foundation, the Center for Responsive Politics (OpenSecrets.org), Govtrack.us, OMBWatch, and OpenCongress.org. Motivated to use web tools to make government more accessible to citizens, these groups provide valued resources to learn about congressional representatives or senators, the positions they hold, and how well they represent our views and beliefs [<http://www.vote-smart.org>]. GovTrack [<http://www.govtrack.us>] and OpenCongress.org [<http://www.opencongress.org>] monitor legislation by providing alerting tools (email, RSS feeds, and widgets). OpenSecrets.org [<http://www.opensecrets.org>] helps us see in graphic terms how much money candidates raise to run a successful campaign and the identity of their contributors. OMBWatch has created Fedspending.org [<http://www.fedspending.org>], a tool designed to track monies spent by the federal government via government contracts. And, putting it all together, The Sunlight Foundation has created Law Maker Profiles [<http://www.sunlightfoundation.com/#profiles>], a fabulous mashup that combines the resources of the above-mentioned groups. All of these organizations fundamentally believe that government data, to be useful, must be accessible to anyone who wants to learn more about decisions that affect all of us.

Digital tools also now exist to ensure that our government officials are held accountable for what they say and do. The internet is a permanent archive. Citizens can now check on past statements for accuracy and honesty. Politicians who falsely claim something can find themselves on the wrong side of the truth.

Accountability tools such as FactCheck.org [<http://factcheck.org>], PolitiFact.com [<http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter>], and the *Washington Post's* The Factchecker [<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker>] all aim to ensure that statements are accurate, truthful, and based on facts. The Obama campaign had its own Fightthesmears.com [<http://www.fightthesmears.com>]. Exposing falsehoods, inaccuracies, and misleading statements became commonplace in the 2008 campaign and went a long way to ensuring that candidates were honest and truthful in what they said. If not, they would have to suffer the consequences. The success of these tools speaks to a real desire by

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the American public to have an election based on issues and solutions, not negative, inaccurate claims that serve only to prevent real, meaningful communication and debate.

### What's Next?

In November 2008, the Federal Web Managers Council issued a white paper, "Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government," that outlined a bold, new vision of the future. It set goals for serving the American people. It stated that citizens should be able to do the following:

- Easily find relevant, accurate, and up-to-date information.
- Understand information the first time they read it.
- Complete common tasks efficiently.
- Get the same answer whether they use the web, phone, email, live chat, read a brochure, or visit in-person.
- Provide feedback and ideas and hear what the government will do with them.
- Access critical information if they have a disability or aren't proficient in English.

—[http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/documents/Federal\\_Web\\_Managers\\_WhitePaper.pdf](http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/documents/Federal_Web_Managers_WhitePaper.pdf), p. 1

The recommendations the council offers "are designed to help the new administration increase the efficiency, transparency, accountability, and participation between government and the American people." Bottom line: By using the tools the web has to offer, communication between government and its citizens should become a two-way dialogue. This would make government more efficient and effective in solving problems and more responsive to the needs and concerns of the American public.

The push for government accountability continues to move forward. Working with congressional leaders, YouTube has created two new channels for members of Congress to post their videos — House [<http://youtube.com/househub>] and Senate [<http://youtube.com/senatehub>]. And Joshua Tauberer of GovTrack fame has created several feeds that allow you to track and monitor posted videos [<http://www.govtrack.us/blog/2009/01/13/track-your-representatives-youtube-videos>].

If we have anything to go on since the election, President Obama and his team continue to embrace digital tools to ensure a more open, transparent, accountable government. Change.gov, the official website of the president, asked the American public to share their ideas with the new administration via the Citizen



President Barack Obama's LinkedIn page

Briefing Book [<http://citizensbriefingbook.change.gov>], rate or comment on the ideas, and promised to present the highest-rated ideas to President Obama after his inauguration. They also provided tools to join in discussion with the policy teams discussing the important issues confronting the new administration [<http://change.gov/page/content/discusservice>]. "Your Seat at the Table" [[http://change.gov/open\\_government/your\\_seat\\_at\\_the\\_table](http://change.gov/open_government/your_seat_at_the_table)] offered an opportunity to see which groups were meeting with the transition teams, view the documents provided to the transition teams, and leave comments for the team. Share Your Own Story [<http://change.gov/page/s/yourstory>] let individuals share experiences of what they thought was right or wrong with the country and contributing ideas on how to make it better. The incoming press secretary Robert Gibbs used the Newsroom blog to answer questions posted by concerned citizens. The first round of questions had more than "20,000 people participating, 10,000 questions submitted, and 1,000,000 votes"; the second round of voting saw "103,512 people submitted 76,031 questions and cast 4,713,083 votes" [[http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/open\\_for\\_questions\\_round\\_2\\_response](http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/open_for_questions_round_2_response)].

People are hungry for a government that is open, transparent, and connected to solve real problems. Together, people-powered democracy and Web 2.0 tools can achieve this vision of government in the 21st century. Yes we can! ■



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### The Fine Print

What article would be complete without the usual legal matter? Generally, online reviews are judged by readers who assess them as noteworthy, banal, or grousing. In some circumstances, however, the belly-aching can be construed as libelous, and remember, anonymity is not a guarantee. Service providers may be subpoenaed to track down review writers.

Here are some examples of cases in which reviews were perceived to have crossed the line: A chiropractor initiated a lawsuit when a former patient's review at Yelp suggested that his charges bilked insurers. (Yelp is an online city guide with reviews of local services.) The patient later published an apology on the chiropractor's Yelp page. The same article reported that a dentist sued Yelp for refusing to remove a negative posting from her page. Michael Blackburg, an attorney involved in a Yelp lawsuit, said, "Yelp and other bulletin board sites ... need to think about how to protect the reviewer and reviewee from flame wars or potentially libelous statements."<sup>14</sup> A plastic surgeon in Florida filed a lawsuit against a patient who gave the physician bad grades online and also against patients who cancelled procedures because of reviews.<sup>15</sup> And a country club in Florida is seeking damages from an online reviewer for "posting a defamatory review that caused a noticeable drop in business."<sup>16</sup> There are others — a quick search in Google News, Google News Archive, or LexisNexis should reveal more.

These types of incidents may increase, but it's unlikely Defoe's heirs will root out "Sylvester" for beginning a one-star review of *Moll Flanders* with, "I had to read this for a book club, and a fifth of the way into it, I began to wish I were blind." Nor will Cormac McCarthy become rabid over the review "Blimp" gave *All the Pretty Horses*, which starts, "An OK book with distracting grammar."

Note: Yelp does remove some reviews. If it believes businesses are "trading reviews" (giving a positive review in exchange for a positive review), it will delete both users' accounts. Yelp's position is that in order to preserve review integrity, it must delete accounts of any entity it thinks circulates fraudulent reviews. One businesswoman is hoping to mount a class-action suit. She has created two websites asking people that have been yanked by Yelp to sign up.<sup>17</sup>

### Other Thoughts

In *American Libraries*, Bradford Lee Eden's "Ending the Status Quo" is a piercing rebuke of the traditional OPAC. He asserts that

people aren't using it, because they construct and organize information on their own terms.<sup>18</sup> The responses to his article ran under the title "The Library Is not a Business." The library, in our most pristine vision, may not be a business, but in reality, it does have to run like one. I doubt the Gartner Group survey I will quote included any librarians as participants, but its conclusions still apply. In September 2008, survey results reported: "Web 1.0 sites are becoming insufficient. 41% of the businesses participating in the survey will definitely add community capabilities. The company insiders said, 'Successful organizations will master the art of user-contributed content and communities as part of the consumer experience ... Opinions matter. Members of communities value user-contributed content — more than content provided by the seller.'"<sup>19</sup> The survey results added, "Web reviews carry

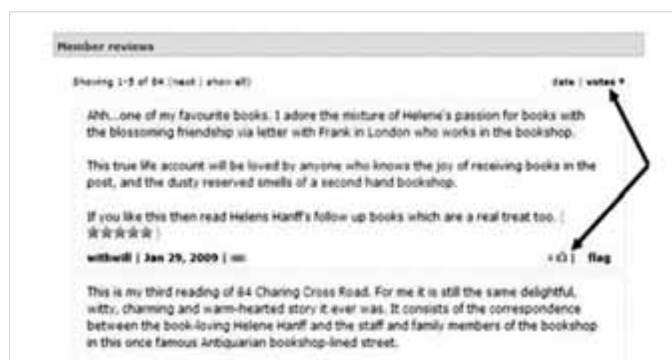


Figure 3. These reviews are available at LibraryThing. Note that the user can sort on the number of "helpful" votes that the review has received.



Figure 4. When the user opens a review in an OPAC that subscribes to ChillFresh, the user can sort the reviews by newest, oldest, highest, lowest, and most useful. Note that at the bottom, the user can vote on the usefulness of the review.

weight with buyers: With the Web, buyers have more available to them than just the product information by the seller; they have access to reviews by professionals and users of the products. Buyers can use these reviews to determine whether a product meets or exceeds their personal requirements. As a result of this trend, many sites offer their own product reviews to avoid having buyers leave the site to investigate the product.”<sup>20</sup> That final sentence is significant. Why make a user dash off to another website for a book review, when the OPAC can potentially offer multiple reviews? If we substitute the words “library” for “seller,” “patrons” for “buyers,” and “library materials” for “products,” this information applies to libraries as well as any other institution with a presence on the web.

One cannot advance the case that the library remains the center of research, thought, and knowledge, while one simultaneously remains static in the face of change. Many articles that deal with improving the image of libraries dwell on promotion. Others emphasize the need for feedback. But if librarians are serious about inviting the patron to the table, more work needs to be done—for example, let’s try to quantify the effects of social networking. No one I asked, including Tim Spalding, had tried to establish a connection between item reviews and circulation statistics. Establishing this link would make this social networking feature more palatable to all librarians.

Similarly, considering the business research I’ve cited that reports high-quality reviews as more helpful than others, I have yet to see a critical mass of this type of voting done in LibraryThing or ChiliFresh (even though both allow people to “vote” on the helpfulness of reviews). ChiliFresh also has the ability to have its reviews sorted by highest or lowest starred rating, but neither it nor LibraryThing takes the online review task so seriously as Amazon, which presents the helpful positive and negative reviews side by side. Permitting OPAC users to read reviews and write them shouldn’t just be “all in good fun.” Online reviews matter; let’s use them purposefully. ■

## Endnotes

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