

# ORGANIZING WITHOUT AN ORGANIZATION: THE OBAMA NETWORKING REVOLUTION

Geoff Norquay

Barack Obama's capture of the 2008 Democratic nomination rewrote the rulebook on campaign techniques. By marrying information technology and social networking, he empowered a juggernaut of citizen participation that recruited 750,000 volunteers, created 8,000 online affinity groups and organized 30,000 events. It also smashed all records for fundraising — more than \$200 million — with almost half from individual donations of less than \$200. Geoff Norquay explores how he did it, and what it could mean for the political process in Canada.

La façon dont Barack Obama s'est fait élire candidat démocrate à la présidence américaine a radicalement modifié les techniques de campagne électorale. En jumelant les technologies de l'information au réseautage social, il a fait exploser la participation des citoyens, ce qui lui a permis de recruter 750 000 bénévoles, de créer 8 000 groupes d'affinité en ligne et d'organiser 30 000 événements. Au passage, il a fracassé tous les records de collecte de fonds (plus de 200 millions de dollars), dont près de la moitié provenait de dons individuels inférieurs à 200 dollars. Geoff Norquay analyse ses méthodes et ce qu'elles pourraient signifier pour le processus politique canadien.



Americans have always been early adopters of technological innovation in electoral campaigns:

- In the 1930s and '40s, Franklin Roosevelt became the first “communicator-in-Chief” through his innovative use of radio, which enabled his “fireside chats” during the Depression and the Second World War and the first effective use of that medium in national election campaigns.
- The first televised presidential debate, in September 1960, demonstrated John F. Kennedy's clear mastery of TV as an effective means to reach millions of voters, and was likely the turning point in a very close election.
- In 1972, George McGovern's campaign was the first to link voters' lists to the telephone and to use phone banks systematically to reach millions of voters.
- Led by innovators Karl Rove and Richard Viguerie, the GOP pioneered direct mail in the 1970s, combining voter outreach with both hot-button issues and fundraising.
- Bill Clinton's successful 1992 campaign sidestepped expensive network advertising by embracing much cheaper cable TV ad buys that could be targeted right down to a zip code.
- In 2004, the George Bush campaign perfected micro-targeting, in which voters' locations, income levels, vot-

ing histories, family demographics and buying habits were linked to estimate the possibility of likely support. The Bush campaign successfully prospected among millions of voters in swing states, many in heavily Democratic areas normally ignored by the GOP.

- Also in 2004, Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean was the first to harness the Internet to organize supporters online and also to link voter mobilization to financial contributions.

In this overheated season of US presidential politics, it's become accepted wisdom that Barack Obama won this year's Democratic nomination in large measure because of his campaign's mastery of information technology (IT) and its understanding of social networking.

Much of the focus has been on his wildly successful Web-based fundraising program, which by July 2008 had produced a torrent of cash — more than \$200 million — and almost half of it from individual donations of less than \$200.

But there's a lot more going on here than a state-of-the-art Net-based fundraising effort. In fact, campaign finance was just one of the many ways that Obama's IT and social networking approaches revolutionized citizen participation in his campaign for the Democratic nomination. By mid-

summer this year, the resulting explosion in democratic engagement had recruited 750,000 active volunteers, created 8,000 affinity groups and organized 30,000 events.

At its conceptual level, what the Obama campaign achieved is striking in its simplicity, and its complexity. It used basic information technology to enlist, empower and mobilize a vast

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and largely self-organizing social network. It created an online community of supporters who became both the ground troops and the financial base for a hugely successful grassroots political campaign.

The Obama IT juggernaut began with a couple of Internet start-up whiz kids, two 20-something geniuses who provided the impetus, the expertise and the direction.

Joe Rospars, director of new media for the campaign, was a veteran of Howard Dean's 2004 blog group, and later a founding partner of Blue State Digital, a leading-edge Washington Internet-based strategy, communications and fundraising firm. The Obama campaign also attracted Chris Hughes, one of the three co-founders of Facebook and an expert on how to develop, nurture and manage online communities.

Rospars and Hughes both recognized that the secret of social networking is to connect friends and share information around an issue, interest or cause, the idea being that self-generated peer-to-peer participation is much more likely to flourish in the absence of experts or authority figures who guide or mediate conversations. You just provide the user-friendly framework and some flexible, downloadable software, and stand back.

**T**he first step was to establish the basic architecture.

Rospars and his Blue State colleagues updated and rebuilt the tools they had developed for the 2004 Dean campaign to create a comprehensive suite of applications. Candidates have had Web sites for years, but when

My.barackobama.com launched at the start of the campaign, it was light years ahead of anything ever seen in politics.

The software platform provided an almost unlimited array of opportunities for individual, self-directed participation in the campaign. Among many other options, you could:

- establish a personal profile page;
- register to vote;
- watch key speeches;
- subscribe to campaign updates and messages;
- start your own affinity group with a listserv for your friends, and then network with those friends;
- organize your own local or regional events and track RSVPs;
- download lists and keep track of your outreach calls to fellow voters, while cleaning and updating the list for future use by the central campaign;
- conduct your own online tutorial on how to organize for the next week's state caucuses;
- sign up for text message updates on your mobile phone; and
- create your own blog, with the ability to cross-post entries to the community blogs of the interest groups you can join.

Among all these features, one of the key groundbreakers was a new software component that enabled volunteers to make outreach calls from their homes, including tools for better management of scripts and lists, as well as improved integration with voter databases.

**A**nd of course, the financial contribution sector of the Web site was what the experts call the "killer app." As Joshua Green described it in the June issue of the *Atlantic*, "You can, of course, click on a button and make a donation, or you can sign up for the subscription model, as thousands already have, and donate a little every month. You can set up your own page, establish your target number, pound your friends into submission with e-mails to pony up, and watch your personal fund-raising thermometer rise."

In one startling step, these capabilities merged the formerly separate campaign activities of fundraising and contributing. With campaign finance reform having ruled out the traditional large corporate donations and the various "soft money" dodges, the only way to fundraise was through individual donors. The genius of the Obama approach was that it enabled thousands of individuals to contribute one moment and then become a campaign fundraiser the next.

On both the organizational and fundraising sides, there were a number of radical departures behind My.barackobama.com.

The first was to redefine and expand the opportunities for individual participation in a political campaign. For those of us running campaigns who have felt the frustration of trying to respond to someone who calls up and says, "Hi, I'd like to volunteer; what can I do?" this was no small feat. Providing a positive response to such a call requires knowledge not only of what needs to be done, but also how it will be coordinated and/or managed, and how the activities and outcomes will be monitored.

The Obama approach removed all that uncertainty and all those organizational demands. It provided volunteers with the tools to go out and take action on their own. It empowered them to choose their interests and priorities and work at their own pace in their own homes. It created an

electronic community of peer populists that enabled campaign managers to leverage and magnify their efforts through the activities of many.

Second, the ubiquity of the Internet removed geography as a barrier to individual political action across a vast country. Using lists provided by Obama headquarters, the unseen army could reach out with thousands of individual calls and messages, leapfrogging from one state to another through the long primary season.

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While the candidate was campaigning in one region, they were mobilizing the ground troops elsewhere for the next battle. When the candidate showed up for the next state campaign, there was a virtual campaign team waiting for him, already organized and already engaged.

This capability paid huge dividends in Texas. While Hillary Clinton had 20,000 volunteers at work on the ground in Texas, 104,000 Texans had already joined My.BarackObama.com. This advantage proved decisive. Texas elects delegates in two ways, through both statewide direct election and local caucuses. While Clinton won the direct vote by 51 to 47 percent, Obama’s organization so overwhelmed the caucuses that he emerged with an overall 99-to-94 delegate victory.

The third innovation of the Obama IT revolution was the way it engaged with and leveraged opportunities offered by other new-media social networking sites. The multiplier effect was stunning. By July 30 this year, Obama had over 400,000 MySpace friends and 1.25 million Facebook supporters, and millions more had viewed various Obama

speeches and video clips on YouTube.

The fourth and final point that must be acknowledged is how brilliantly this entire effort was conceived, designed and managed. By putting technology and social networking at the centre of the campaign, Obama created a decentralized workforce and gave them autonomy and avenues for participation. But this breakthrough succeeded only because the central campaign managed to

walk the fine line between anarchy and top-down micromanaging. Also, as several technology experts have noted, the campaign kept the information technology simple. They did not customize heavily, and avoided unproven “bleeding edge” software applications. They also were able to accommodate tremendous growth in usage, which was critical, because today’s cyber-volunteers will not put up with long delays or systems that don’t work.

The IT/social networking revolution engineered by Obama is certainly the future of politics in Western democracies, but before we declare the end of the traditional campaign, it’s worth noting that a number of stars aligned to create this year’s stunning success.

Because of his compelling personal narrative and his communication skills, and because the moment was perfect for his message of “change,” Obama’s candidacy became a national movement that lent itself to mass mobilization among that very portion of the population that is the most new media friendly and tech-savvy, the younger demographic. In addition,

it’s important to note that the structure of the US political system lends itself much more to mass mobilization than Canada’s. Every four years, at least one of the two parties starts from scratch to pick a presidential candidate, and both parties must run their candidates through the grueling primary system, which simply does not exist in this country.

While the Canadian and American political systems are distinctly different, there is much to be learned from the Obama campaign in this country. In fact, the possibilities are endless:

- Our parties’ national leadership campaigns are likely to be transformed by the technology and techniques deployed by Obama in the past two years. Future leadership contenders will need IT platforms that accommodate the latest in membership contact and outreach, advanced list management, the Obama fundraising approach, text messaging, blogging and so on. Anyone thinking about a leadership contest in the next year or so should be recruiting technology geeks now.
- Some Canadian political parties, most notably the federal Conservatives, have become quite adept at micro-targeting. That’s the sophisticated slicing and dicing of voter characteristics to produce archetypes to enable the shaping of tailored campaign messages for discrete population groups. Is the next step more aggressive Internet-based outreach to such groups, the creation of online communities of interest or campaign communication and mobilization through targeted text messaging? With the right lists and the right IT platforms, all are now possible.
- All Canadian parties employ some form of get-out-the-vote programs



*Policy Options photo*

Barack Obama's campaign has been on the leading edge of the Internet revolution, with a listserve of 1.5 million subscribers to his Web site [My.barackobama.com](http://My.barackobama.com)

for election day. The list management capabilities of the Obama campaign would add sophistication and organization to the management of a critical function in a closely fought national election.

As the US election begins in earnest, political and new media analysts are already looking ahead to what the Obama IT/social networking revolution will mean for the national campaign, and also what it might mean for a potential Obama presidency. If Obama takes [my.barackobama.com](http://my.barackobama.com) into the West Wing, imagine the

opportunities for direct communication between a president and his electorate, speaking directly over the heads of Congress to the people. And imagine his ability to use his online communities to target members of Congress to get his legislative programs passed.

Already in Canada, we have a working example of an online social network targeting the political system. Michael Geist, the Canada Research Chair in Internet and e-commerce law at the University of Ottawa, has some issues with the content of Bill C-61,

the federal government's recently introduced bill to amend Canada's aged copyright act. Not satisfied to write papers and circulate them to colleagues, a few months ago he organized Fair Copyright for Canada on Facebook.

It's now got 24 virtual chapters across Canada...and 90,000 members.

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