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# BARACK OBAMA:

HOW CONTENT  
AND WEB 2.0 HELPED  
WHITE HOUSE

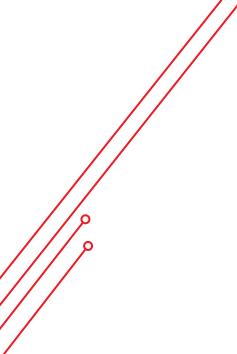
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# OBAMA FOR AMERICA WASN'T JUST THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ONLINE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN; IT WAS ARGUABLY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL WEB 2.0 DEPLOYMENT TO DATE. HERE'S THE INSIDE STORY OF HOW IT ALL WORKED.



**W**HEN I FIRST SAT DOWN WITH U.S. SENATOR BARACK OBAMA TO TALK ABOUT running for President in the fall of 2006—some four months before he announced he'd enter the race—it was already clear where he saw himself. We sat in his Senate office, under a wall decorated with photos of Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Thurgood Marshall, and John F. Kennedy—all men called forth in great historical moments to lead a movement and become the standard bearer for a generation's ideals.

I asked him whether he thought he was at a similar moment in time. "I'm not a political mechanic," he said, but "in terms of the big picture and instincts as to what's important to the country and what's important to people, I think my instincts are good."

So was this his time? He smiled: "I agree with the saying that timing is everything, but I believe that whether you have a good sense of timing is largely determined retrospectively."

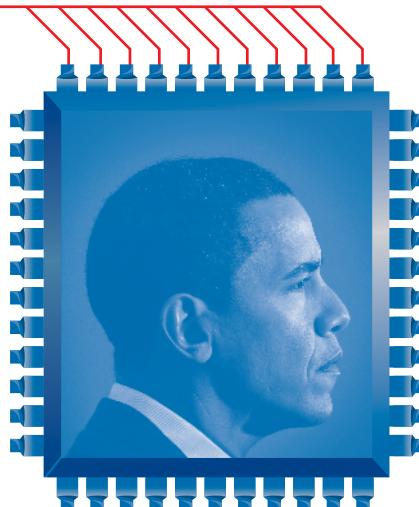
It turned out that his timing was perfect—a new world was forming and technologies like YouTube, Facebook, and text messaging that barely existed just four years prior had matured to become a part of everyday life. And from the first moments of Barack Obama's campaign in February 2007, his bottom-up, revolutionary style contrasted sharply with that of Hillary Clinton and John McCain.

### THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF A REVOLUTION

Indeed, in any discussion of the 2008 presidential race, it's important to stipulate this fact right up front: in any prior year, Barack Obama would have lost. Here was a junior senator, a relatively-unknown black politician running against the most established, powerful, and well-financed Democratic machine in modern history: the Clinton family. So how did a man just four years removed from the Illinois State Senate catapult himself to the White House in a landslide and defeat two of politics' best-known brands, Hillary Clinton and John McCain? How did he pull off a staggering margin of nearly 200 electoral votes and 8.5 million popular votes and win nine states George W. Bush took in 2004?

The short answer is that Barack Obama understood that since the last open presidential election in 2000, the technological revolution that has changed every aspect of American life had fundamentally realigned the power dynamic in politics as well. So while Hillary Clinton and John McCain set out to run the last campaign all over again, Obama forged ahead and ran the first campaign of the 21st Century. The sheer scale of his presidential bid dwarfed everything that came before it: The campaign surpassed some three million individual contributors—millions more than George W. Bush garnered as the sitting president in 2004; Obama's Facebook page had more than three million "friends"—six times more than John McCain; and there were more than 100,000 supporter-organized events across the country. The campaign's email list surged to more than 13 million addresses, larger than the combined size of the lists of the national Democratic party, MoveOn.org—a liberal policy advocacy group—and U.S. Sen. John Kerry, George W. Bush's opponent in the 2004 presidential election. Indeed, the success of Obama's fundraising effort was so unprecedented that by the final weeks of the campaign he was buying 30-minute blocks of national network television time and advertising in Xbox video games.

The campaign had 57 separate MySpace profiles, as well as presences (both official and unofficial) on Facebook, Flickr, Digg, Eventful, LinkedIn, BlackPlanet, FaithBase, Eons, Glee, MiGente, MyBatanga, AsianAve, and the Democratic National Committee's own Partybuilder platform. Whereas four years prior Vermont Gov.



Howard Dean's presidential campaign ran just two websites—its official one and the campaign blog—Obama's team oversaw more than a hundred different websites from MySpace to FightTheSmears.org. This vast Web presence helped spread the campaign message even on the micro-blogging site Twitter.com, where Obama amassed some quarter million "followers."

The 2008 presidential race was going to be historic no matter what. Only once since the 1920s had the nation seen a race without an incumbent president or vice president in the race—and that race (1952) involved five-star General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme allied commander of World War II, who been proffered the nomination of both parties. Nevertheless, the presidential contest of 2008, which lasted on the Democratic side through 57 primaries and caucuses and saw more Americans vote than ever before, proved even more of a turning point than pundits imagined.

To say that Obama won because of the Internet would be an oversimplification; it's more accurate to say that he couldn't have won without it. "In my search for the 'killer app,' or evidence of how technology was used in groundbreaking new ways, I've come to realize that what really happened with Obama is far more complicated and nuanced," explains Michael Silberman, who headed Howard Dean's online organizing efforts in 2004 and now is managing director of the Washington office of Internet strategy firm EchoDitto. "The game-changer in the Obama campaign, as I found in talking to key staff—and in volunteering myself in southern Ohio—was that technology and the Internet was not an add-on for them. It was a carefully

considered element of almost every critical campaign function."

As Obama's staff tell it, his was the first presidential campaign where nobody was trying to kill Web efforts. From start-to-finish, "Obama for America"—the campaign's official website—wasn't just the most successful online political campaign but arguably the most successful Web 2.0 deployment to date anywhere. The story of how the campaign put all the pieces of that jigsaw puzzle together—many specifics of which have never been told before—is one of tight coordination and top-to-bottom integration.

### THE OBAMA TRIFECTA: MESSAGE, MONEY, MOBILIZATION

In many ways Obama's campaign was like the band that took 10 years to become an overnight sensation. Personally he's been honing the skills and ethos of organizing and community building since he started working in the 1980s as a \$1,000-a-month community organizer with the Developing Communities Project in Chicago's South Side. As he said in a 1995 article at the outset of his campaign for the Illinois state senate, "In America, we have this strong bias toward individual action. You know, we idolize the John Wayne hero who comes in to correct things with both guns blazing. But individual actions, individual dreams, are not sufficient. We must unite in collective action, build collective institutions and organizations."

Obama's successful model focused on "The Three Ms": message, money, and mobilization, each enhancing the next in a virtuous cycle that enabled the campaign to steamroll all comers. "Barack had to be a different kind of candidate. If he ran as a traditional candidate, he wasn't going to be successful," explains deputy campaign manager Steve Hildebrand, a 22-year veteran campaign organizer. As Gina Cooper, one of the grassroots activists who came out of the Dean 2004 campaign explains, "Barack Obama's campaign [was] about rewriting the social contract between citizens and government."

While the media and pundits swoon at how unexpected Obama's success has been, the campaign never had any doubt: At the very start of construction of his website and organizing tools, they aimed big to ensure they could scale up rapidly as the campaign grew. Much effort was expended

in determining the right toolset, in streamlining and minimizing the number of databases, and in ensuring integration up and down the campaign hierarchy. Great thought was put into ensuring that the campaign and the Internet were fully integrated, which resulted in a sophisticated setup whereby instead of existing as its own silo in the campaign hierarchy, the technology team simultaneously was a part of the fundraising, field, and communications apparatus. Obama blurred the traditional definitions of the three skills in ways no candidate had ever done before.

One of the things he recognized early on was that online efforts can't be done on the cheap anymore—the days of the candidate's geeky nephew as webmaster were gone. One of the first signs of Obama's grasp of this fact was that he hired Jim Brayton as his U.S. Senate webmaster; Brayton had been the webmaster of Howard Dean's

development alone ran nearly \$2 million in 2007, which would have seemed absurdly high to most candidates.

One problem the campaign tackled immediately was integrating a single database as the back-end of all the various tools, something never before successfully done in a presidential campaign. The single core database, which stretched to terabytes of data, helped power and enable cross-platform integration never before seen. The task of database integration fell to Jascha Franklin-Hodge, Blue State's chief technology officer, who had seen how the Dean campaign in 2004 was hampered by its reliance on half a dozen different databases. Using MySQL® and PHP, Franklin-Hodge created a single-core database to serve all MyBarackObama.com (MyBO) users in all their core activities—donations, social networking, and activism. (MySQL® is a widely-used open-source database;

The real genius of the Obama campaign didn't lie in its toolkit, though. The software, organizing tools, email and texting capabilities, voter files, and credit card processing systems were all available to any candidate in this election cycle. Online tools today are commodities. It was how the campaign exploited those tools that set it apart. As Jeremy Bird, one of the campaign's leading field organizers explains, "The Internet is the hammer, not the strategy."

#### NO WEBOPHOBIA

Even today on most campaigns—and, for that matter, in most business environments—senior staff tend to be wary of the Internet's Wild-West nature and especially wary of the openness necessary to run a successful online venture. The McCain campaign and the Clinton campaign both saw regular friction between their online staff and more traditional senior staff. Whereas in 2000, McCain's campaign had been an online pioneer—he was the first candidate to raise a million dollars online—the 2008 campaign seemed like a dinosaur. Terry Nelson, McCain's political director, asked that every page of the campaign website be printed out for approval.

Not so in the Obama camp. Staff from the campaign manager right down to field organizers considered the Internet and information technology critical to everything they did. That recognition, of top-to-bottom integration and philosophical buy-in, was what proved so transformative. "If we don't do this right, shame on us. We're never going to have an opportunity like this again," Hildebrand recalls saying. "We can't be just so single-minded that this is about Barack Obama. It's about a movement that changes the way we do business at every level." Even the candidate himself was a techie: Obama famously cherishes his BlackBerry, and on the campaign trail he regularly zoned out with his iPod. It's fair to say that no presidential candidate in history has had a better grasp of the latest technology—a fact that surely helps explain the green light Obama gave early on to a no-holds-barred Web 2.0 assault.

Each morning, beginning the Monday after Obama's weekend announcement that he would run for president in February 2007, the campaign's Web team—vendors, new media team, field staff, and senior strategists—including Chief Technology

## THE PROCESS WAS REMARKABLY SMOOTH AND ORGANIZED FOR A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN. THERE WASN'T THE INTERNAL DRAMA THAT OFTEN HOUNDS VENDORS, WHERE DIFFERENT PEOPLE ORDER DIFFERENT THINGS. FROM A PROCESS SIDE, IT WAS SHOCKINGLY FUNCTIONAL.

2004 presidential campaign and was experienced with massive databases, email lists, and websites far larger than that of a normal freshman senator.

#### HIRING TOP TECHNOLOGY BRAINS

For the presidential campaign, Obama turned to Joe Rospars, another 2004 Dean veteran now with the firm Blue State Digital, which provided much of the backbone of the campaign's technical infrastructure. His head of online organizing was Chris Hughes, co-founder with Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook.com, and he hired executives from technology companies like Upcoming.org and Orbitz as well. All told, Obama's online staff numbered close to 90 by the end, and Obama for America (BarackObama.com) spent millions of dollars on servers, email systems, development, and text messaging. Initial

PHP, launched in 1994 as "Personal Home Page," is a widely-used scripting language used in producing dynamic Web pages).

"It allowed the campaign to do centralized list-cutting and get a view of who was using the site," says Franklin-Hodge. "All told, Blue State had about 20 people dedicated to the Obama campaign infrastructure." For MyBO, Blue State built several layers of content management. Much of the site was powered by Moveable Type, an open-source Web-content management tool that enables users to build blogs, websites, and social networks on a single platform. The campaign and Blue State also ended up creating many pages in basic HTML in order to combine functionality and integrate different tools. As Franklin-Hodge says, "Not surprisingly, most things that the campaign wanted to do ended up having an action."

ONLINE VOLUNTEER ORGANIZING ESSENTIALLY BUILT THE CAMPAIGN A STRUCTURE IN PLACES WHERE IT DIDN'T EXIST, LETTING PAID STAFF PARACHUTE IN AND IMMEDIATELY TAKE COMMAND OF A WORKING POLITICAL ARMY.

Officer Michael Slaby—gathered for a 9 a.m. conference call to talk through to-do lists and hot issues. “It’s not a job where you can turn off at 5 p.m.,” Franklin-Hodge says. However, he adds, “The process was remarkably smooth and organized for a presidential campaign. There wasn’t the internal drama that often hounds vendors, where different people order different things. From a process side, it was shockingly functional.”

Teams worked around the clock and multi-page disaster recovery documents outlined contingencies for just about every tech-related possibility. Given the pace of money flowing in online—especially during key events like Obama’s August 2008 Democratic convention-floor speech, when donations poured in at \$2 million an hour—any outage could have had a huge impact on campaign resources. For moments like that, Blue State turned back to a model from the Dean campaign and built an entire back-up contribution system in case of emergency, though their frontline system proved so robust it was never used.

**HIRING THE MEDIA, EXPLOITING THE BLOGOSPHERE AND YOUTUBE**

Understanding the importance of message amidst the larger campaign, Joe Rospars, the campaign’s online director, skillfully recruited journalists to script the narrative of a grassroots movement. It was important, Rospars says, that his bloggers and

online media team had a sense of story-telling and narrative. So Sam Graham-Felson, formerly of The Nation magazine, became the campaign’s lead blogger, while Kate Albright-Hana, formerly a documentary for CNN, became one of the lead video gurus. The campaign explained that its heavy online posting schedule and the narrative it developed through roughly 20 blog-posts per day turned out to be an unexpectedly valuable field organizing tool, since people in the field were using the stories of supporters on the blog to connect with undecided voters.

“These numbers were just unimaginable, but we tried to take a magnifying glass and make sure that the individuals didn’t get lost,” says Graham-Felson, who traveled the country for almost two years collecting stories and interviewing supporters. When campaign manager David Plouffe had something to say, he flipped open his Apple Mac Book and recorded short Web videos to broadcast to supporters, updating them on campaign efforts. These narrative efforts—and the tools they used—were unprecedented. All told, the campaign created nearly 2,000 YouTube videos, which in turn were watched for some 14.6 million hours, according to a study by TubeMogul.com.

This multitude of videos, Graham-Felson explains, was part of a broad microtargeting effort whereby each video was aimed at speaking to a particular group of voters or supporters. Those efforts paid off in a big way: TubeMogul estimated that Obama received the equivalent of some \$45 million in “free” television airtime from people watching those videos. One of the surprising lessons from the campaign, Rospars and Graham-Felson say, was that people wanted longer cuts. “In the beginning we were just posting clips, but people kept commenting they wanted the whole thing,” Rospars says. The campaign’s most successful YouTube video—his 37-minute speech on race in Philadelphia in March 2008—was watched by around eight million people online, far more than saw it live on television.

**THE WEB AS UNIQUE ORGANIZING TOOL**

Beyond message, mobilization and money came into play. The campaign carefully used tiered ladders of engagement to encourage supporters to take on more responsibility or donate more. MyBO

featured a wealth of organizing tools not generally even available in previous campaigns to paid staff, let alone to any self-motivated supporter. But by the end of the campaign some two million people had set up accounts on MyBO, enabling them to blog on the site. It also provided features that let supporters generate lists of uncommitted voters to call from home and create canvas lists to knock on doors, as well as generate their own fundraising goals among their friends and family. Such information had never been made so publicly accessible by a campaign before; the campaign realized that the value it gained in distributing normally closely-held voter contact information far and wide more than outweighed any traditional tendency to protect the crown jewels.

About MyBO, Chris Hughes draws an important distinction: “We really [thought] of this as an organizing network, not as a social network. If they wanted to contribute to a blog or a group listserv, that’s great, but that’s not what we were building this towards.”

By signing up on MyBO, anyone who organized a house party for Obama got a phone call from an Obama organizer—and if they lived in a battleground state, they got a face-to-face meeting with an organizer before the event. In that face-to-face, the organizer prepped the house-party host on language, gave them campaign supplies, and generally worked to make the supporter feel intimately connected to the campaign. Rather than organize by precinct, as most campaigns do, the campaign staff relied on “Obama teams,” grouping precincts together to build small groups who worked together online and offline to activate social networks, build house parties, and reach undecided voters across a small area. “Online volunteer organizing essentially built the campaign a structure in places where it didn’t exist, letting paid staff parachute in and immediately take command of a working political army,” explains Colin Delaney of Epolitics.com.

In South Carolina, where Obama blew away Hillary Clinton—and where even her state campaign chair Don Fowler admitted Obama had organized the state like never before—more than 10,000 volunteers made at least three contacts with every African-American voter in the state. This neighbor-to-neighbor outreach driven by MyBO, explains Jeremy Bird, the organizer

for the state, was unprecedented: "No campaign I've ever been on has been able to do that. We were told over and over that South Carolina isn't a field state. Every state is a field state if you do it right."

Despite these well-orchestrated successes, there were still a few surprises. In early August 2007, in a rare unprepared moment, the campaign was flooded by tens of thousands of birthday wishes on Facebook and MySpace as Obama's August 4th birthday approached. Staff spent hours responding to each one they could.

### OBAMA ORGANIZING FELLOWS

Nationally, more than 10,000 people applied to become one of 3,000 Obama "Organizing Fellows," who were given three days of training and then turned loose in a community. Fellows in Atlanta managed to register 1,200 new voters in a single day. The data from each of these efforts fed back up through the campaign databases all the way to organizers like Bird and campaign leaders like Plouffe, who had access to sophisticated dashboards to track activity. Organizers like Bird could access automated activity reports sent right to their BlackBerrys, which helped ensure that comments from grassroots activists got read by campaign leaders.

The marathon battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in state caucuses and primaries across the nation in 2008 helped lay the groundwork for Obama's fall victory. Campaign insiders believe this seemingly-endless season was one of the best things that happened to the campaign; it allowed them to build grassroots networks across the country, sign up volunteers, and test out field operations in every state long before the November general election, thus allowing them to refine tools, data collection, and reporting. Blue State worked continuously to integrate the campaign's main database with its voter files, run by Obama's Voter Action Network (VAN).

"If you're in the field, having access to what types of interactions they've had with the campaigns online is really helpful," Franklin-Hodge explains. The VAN system, filled with highly-refined records on over 200 million Americans eligible to vote, allowed the campaign to create custom walk- and door-knock lists, as well as manage volunteers. Depending on access rights, everyone from local precinct organizers to campaign manager Plouffe

could view reams of statistics on actions and tool usage. Particularly powerful were the tools that allowed disaggregated phone banking and let people make telephone calls from home on their own time. Using the Blue State phone-banking tool, Obama supporters made more than three million phone calls online in the last four days of the campaign alone.

### CIVIC STRUCTURE: BRINGING ALL EFFORTS TOGETHER VIA THE WEB

The campaign directly attributed its success in the February 5, 2008 Super Tuesday primaries and caucuses, which provided the lead that Hillary Clinton found insurmountable, to its online organizing. Obama won big in places like Wyoming where there weren't many paid staff but there were self-organized groups that had been at work for a year.

Groups in Arizona and New Mexico were canvassing undecided voters by August of last year using lists generated through MyBO. "This was way before real staff were dropping into the states," Graham-Felson says. "It wasn't just about putting staff in, it was giving people the capacity to organize themselves."

Over the course of the campaign, more than two million people opened profiles on MyBO and organized some 200,000 offline events. Some 35,000 different volunteer groups formed across the country and even abroad among groups of American ex-pats. Those efforts in turn helped generate spontaneous, self-organized events like the "Bridges for Obama" movement—where Obama supporters gathered on bridge spans across the globe and snapped photos of themselves (Google "Bridges for Obama" for a taste)—which led to thousands of similar events.

"The Obama campaign made the greatest investment in this civic structure," says organizing guru Marshall Ganz, who worked with the campaign. "It's very important to distinguish between carpenters and tools. The investment in this campaign of creating skilled carpenters was what enabled them to use the tools as well as they did." As Ganz explains, it was this tight integration between all platforms that helped power the Obama campaign: "Saul Alinsky said there are two forces of power: organized power and organized money. Obama managed to

## VOLUNTEERS COMPETE ONLINE TO BOOST RANKINGS

### COLORADAN TIARE FLORA WAS ONE OF

the millions of people the Obama campaign brought into politics. She had signed up to volunteer for John Kerry in 2004, though no one from the campaign ever contacted her to follow up. Through MyBarackObama.com (MyBO), she organized her first gathering in Telluride just weeks after Obama entered the campaign in February 2007. Eight people showed up. By fall, she'd helped organize a coordinated outreach effort at the local farmer's market, months before paid Obama staff showed up in the state. Obama won both the caucus and the state in the general election, thanks largely to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers like Flora. "It was all because of Obama. They'd heard his call. It's time to stand up and be counted," she explains.

Building off an idea that was pioneered by George W. Bush's 2004 reelection campaign, MyBO gave Flora points for each action she took—from attending a house party to making a telephone call—and ranked her total against that of every other MyBO volunteer in the country. By the middle of last summer, she'd climbed the chart to become the 1,390th most passionate "Obamaniac". One of the leading volunteers—who at one point was in the campaign's top 100—was a 15-year-old from Sheboygan, Wis., named Asher Heimermann. Prohibited by law from contributing to the campaign himself, he set up his own fundraising page on MyBO and raised \$13,725 from 335 people, becoming one of the campaign's most successful "micro-builders." McCain's website also had an activist leader board and rewarded top supporters with its own campaign swag, including baseball hats.

figure out how to do both." It was, after all, the strength and breadth of Obama's online movement that provided the justification for his campaign.

In June 2007, just five months after Obama entered the race and more than seven months before the first primary votes, the campaign demonstrated its organizing chops with a 50-state "Walk for Change" event that spawned 2,400 events across the country. Using MyBO and the campaign database, Obama for America carefully tracked and recorded what each supporter on MyBO had done: how many telephone calls they placed, how many events they attended, and how much money they donated and raised.

Hildebrand says the campaign learned from Howard Dean in 2004 that the Internet alone won't win an election, but that by marrying the offline and online components,

lion phone calls were made via the online phone-banking tools on MyBO. Those efforts worked in concert with the campaign's online voter registration project, VoteForChange.com. Launched only in September 2008, it registered more than 700,000 in a matter of weeks.

#### DANGLING THE BAIT; COLLECTING CELL PHONE NUMBERS

Perhaps the single best example of the campaign's ability to pull all the tools together came during the Biden announcement. In its largest effort, the campaign encouraged supporters to sign up for text messages to be the first to learn of Obama's running-mate selection—an effort that, campaign insiders admit—was more about collecting cell phone numbers to call or text on election day as part of its get-out-the-vote efforts than it was about breaking

numbers and then, in the days leading up to the general election, sent targeted texts to supporters based on their zip codes with information about where to vote and how to get more information.

#### PULLING OUT ALL STOPS FOR THE RACE SPEECH

Prior to Obama's critical March 18, 2008, speech on race in Philadelphia, the campaign also pulled out all stops, promoting the event with emails, text messages, blogs, the campaign website, social networking sites, and YouTube. Afterwards, the full-length speech, all 37 minutes of it, became the campaign's most-watched video of the election—some eight million people watched it online, vastly more than saw it live on television. Donation and sign-up windows linked to the speech on BarackObama.com helped capture supporters'

## HILDEBRAND SAYS THE CAMPAIGN LEARNED FROM HOWARD DEAN IN 2004 THAT THE INTERNET ALONE WON'T WIN AN ELECTION, BUT THAT BY MARRYING THE OFFLINE AND ONLINE COMPONENTS, THE CAMPAIGN COULD CREATE AN UNBEATABLE FORCE.

the campaign could create an unbeatable force. They constantly exploited this wisdom: As the campaign learned that its supporters broadly fell into two categories—those who made hundreds of voter contacts and those who made around 10 (with not many in between)—the Obama machine tweaked its tools to make sure that those first 10 were real neighbors. "If you're only making 10 calls, it's better to make them to the people on your street than to people anywhere in the country," Hughes says.

And in the summer of 2008, when the campaign planned more than 1,000 meetings across the country to generate ideas for inclusion in the Democratic National Committee platform, it didn't send a blast email; instead it combed its database for those people most interested in policy and targeted them for emails asking them to host a party or attend a party—but that was only after first reaching out to its 50,000 core organizers who had previously hosted events to get them to prepopulate the site and organize events. And when it came to registering voters, more than nine mil-

news in an appealing new way. The text message read, "Barack has chosen Senator Joe Biden to be our VP nominee. Watch the first Obama-Biden rally live at 3pm ET on www.BarackObama.com. Spread the word!" Because of its technology infrastructure, the campaign could direct viewers right to the campaign website, rather than CNN or one of the networks, which meant that it controlled the entire event coverage—and could put a big donate button right next to the webcast. Once on the site, visitors could sign up to volunteer, get more involved, read more about Sen. Joe Biden, or, even later, view text of the announcement speech.

By contrast, McCain's campaign discussed the same strategy and rejected it as "beneath" a presidential candidate. Mired in tools and strategies that might have worked in previous campaigns, the McCain campaign sent only a single text message during the whole campaign—a reminder the day before the election. The Obama campaign, on the other hand, built a list of more than three million cell phone

enthusiasm and encouraged feedback; more than 10,000 people left comments about the speech on YouTube.

#### ZEROING IN WITH SOME 7,000 UNIQUE EMAILS

The campaign worked hard fine-tuning its ability to hone in on just those most likely to attend each event. The overall opt-in email list ended up at more than 13 million, though rarely did the entire list get the same email at the same time. For one thing, the campaign tracked when people tended to open their email and segmented the list accordingly—if you tended to be an early-morning email reader, you'd get it then; if you had a record of opening email late in the day, you'd get it then. More than that, though, the campaign used its vast database to continually refine interests and preferences. If you donated \$25, the next email might ask for \$50; if you gave \$50, you might get an email asking for \$100. And if you made telephone calls, you might get an email asking you to host a house party. All told, the campaign created some 7,000

## ADVERTISING ON GOOGLE, TEXTING, AND ROLLING IN DOUGH

### ON ITS WAY TO AN EARTH-SHAKING \$500

million online haul, the Obama campaign had great success "matching" donations—wherein individuals signed up to donate, say, \$25—but only if someone else donated the same amount. The challenge ran hundreds of thousands of times successfully and created friendships across the country among supporters. And while most of the campaign's online money came from small donations, the campaign saw a not insignificant number of donors max out with \$2,300 donations online, in some cases even coming to the site through Google Ads. In fact, Obama's campaign, more than any campaign in history, relied on the power of Google.

Obama advertised heavily in Google's contextual search—spending tens of thousands of dollars a month—to drive people to his website, to sign up for his email list, and to create events. All of the campaign's online advertising was focused specifically on getting people to sign up for the email list rather than garnering immediate donations, figuring that having an email address was vastly more valuable than a single donation. With websites like FightTheSmears.org, an official site that aggregated dozens of scurrilous rumors and attacks on Obama, the campaign also skillfully employed the power of search engine optimization to make its own site appear at the top of results for people searching about questions about whether Obama was a Muslim.

The campaign also worked hard to reach people using their technology of choice. Scott Goodstein, who in 2004 worked on a grassroots movement called PunkVoter, came to head the campaign's text-messaging efforts as the campaign recognized that for people under the age of 30, texting was just as important as email or phone calls. Throughout the campaign, text messages were used to announce key speeches, television appearances, or to let supporters know of events in the area.

different versions of targeted emails. That tiered ladder helped push supporters to get more involved at every step. While the average number of donations per contributor was just over two, tens of thousands donated many times. The Obama campaign refused to release specifics about its donor breakdown. But it is known that of the 6.5 million total donations made online, six million were under \$100.

The volume of communications with supporters from Obama for America was unprecedented. Blue State, which processed the campaign's email, sent over a billion emails during the course of the campaign. To do so, Blue State relied on its custom-built, proprietary email system—which it recreated several times to handle ever-increasing mail volumes. "They understood that no one had ever done what they were trying to do. There wasn't something off-the-shelf that was just [put] to work," says Franklin-Hodge.

### THREE MILLION EMAILS PER HOUR

While at the beginning of the campaign, Blue State was able to send 200,000 emails an hour, by the end of the campaign, upgrades allowed them to churn out three million per hour—which still meant that it took more than four hours to send the rare email that went out to the entire list. Franklin-Hodge says he's unaware of any system in the world that's more robust, adding, "We made what was to me a stunning amount of headway on those problems in this cycle." To send email, the campaign turned to a Web portal set up by Blue State whereby they could select any of more than 50 different ways to segment the list by a wide range of criteria such as zip code, donation level, willingness to host a house party, voter registration status, or an expressed interest in a policy topic like the environment.

### THE NEW PARADIGM

While Obama's technology efforts were certainly unprecedented, campaign strategists say they don't believe they did anything shockingly revolutionary. They took existing tools—many of which are now four or five years old—and merely integrated them better than their predecessors and opponents. Post-campaign, Blue State has been flooded by requests from candidates around the world for Web

help. As Rosspars says, "In 2004, everyone said Howard Dean's online success was an exception. Now they're saying the same about Obama. Sooner or later, people will realize these can't just be exceptions. The essence of it is replicable in almost any environment."

The best technology, however, will not help the wrong candidate. The idea that Obama, like Ghandi, King, Mandela, or the other leaders on his Senate office wall stood in the vanguard of a national call for change was what gave heart and soul to his undertaking. He was able to justify his own candidacy through the movement it created—"I may be

**WE WERE TOLD OVER AND OVER THAT SOUTH CAROLINA ISN'T A FIELD STATE. EVERY STATE IS A FIELD STATE IF YOU DO IT RIGHT.**

young and traditionally inexperienced for the presidency," he seemed to be saying, yet "this mass movement is calling on me to lead them (and us) forward."

What President Obama does with the technology platform and movement that grew up around candidate Obama is still an open question. As former Howard Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi says, "In 2004, we were the Wright Brothers and compared to us, Obama's campaign was the Apollo moon shot. Now that he's in the White House, though, he's back to being the Wright brothers—the first networked president."

However, there are already signs of how the Obama White House will be different: The president has won the fight to hold onto his cherished BlackBerry, and during the debate over the economic stimulus bill in his first weeks in office, he rallied his email list to host "house parties" to discuss the proposed legislation; more than 3,000 people heeded the call and hosted events. |

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