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# How Obama *Really* Did It

The social-networking strategy that took an obscure senator to the doors of the White House.

By David Talbot

Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign manager and Internet impresario, describes Super Tuesday II--the March 4 primaries in Texas, Ohio, Vermont, and Rhode Island--as the moment Barack Obama used social technology to decisive effect. The day's largest hoard of delegates would be contested in Texas, where a strong showing would require exceptional discipline and voter-education efforts. In Texas, Democrats vote first at the polls and then, if they choose, again at caucuses after the polls close. The caucuses award one-third of the Democratic delegates.

Hillary Clinton's camp had about 20,000 volunteers at work in Texas. But in an e-mail, Trippi learned that 104,000 Texans had joined Obama's social-networking site, [www.my.barackobama.com](http://www.my.barackobama.com), known as MyBO. MyBO and the main Obama site had already logged their share of achievements, particularly in helping rake in cash. The month before, the freshman senator from Illinois had set a record in American politics by garnering \$55 million in donations in a single month. In Texas, MyBO also gave the Obama team the instant capacity to wage fully networked campaign warfare. After seeing the volunteer numbers, Trippi says, "I remember saying, 'Game, match--it's over.'"

The Obama campaign could get marching orders to the Texans registered

with MyBO with minimal effort. The MyBO databases could slice and dice lists of volunteers by geographic micro-region and pair people with appropriate tasks, including prepping nearby voters on caucus procedure. "You could go online and download the names, addresses, and phone numbers of 100 people in your neighborhood to get out and vote--or the 40 people on your block who were undecided," Trippi says. "'Here is the leaflet: print it out and get it to them.' It was you, at your computer, in your house, printing and downloading. They did it all very well." Clinton won the Texas primary vote 51 to 47 percent. But Obama's -people, following their MyBO playbook, so overwhelmed the chaotic, crowded caucuses that he scored an overall victory in the Texas delegate count, 99 to 94. His showing nearly canceled out - Clinton's win that day in Ohio. Clinton lost her last major opportunity to stop the Obama juggernaut. "In 1992, Carville said, 'It's the economy, stupid,'" Trippi says, recalling the exhortation of Bill Clinton's campaign manager, James Carville. "This year, it was the network, stupid!"

Throughout the political season, the Obama campaign has dominated new media, capitalizing on a confluence of trends. Americans are more able to access media-rich content online; 55 percent have broadband Internet connections at home, double the figure for spring 2004. Social-networking technologies have matured, and more Americans are comfortable with them. Although the 2004 Dean campaign broke ground with its online meeting technologies and blogging, "people didn't quite have the facility," says - Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford law professor who has given the Obama campaign Internet policy advice (Lessig wrote [The People Own Ideas!](#) in our May/June 2005 issue). "The world has now caught up with the technology." The Obama campaign, he adds, recognized this early: "The key networking advance in the Obama field operation was really deploying community--building tools in a smart way from the very beginning."

Of course, many of the 2008 candidates had websites, click-to-donate tools, and social-networking features--even John McCain, who does not personally use e-mail. But the Obama team put such technologies at the center of its campaign--among other things, recruiting 24-year-old Chris Hughes, cofounder of Facebook, to help develop them. And it managed those tools well. Supporters had considerable discretion to use MyBO to organize on their own; the campaign did not micromanage but struck a balance between top-

down control and anarchy. In short, Obama, the former Chicago community organizer, created the ultimate online political machine.

The Obama campaign did not provide access or interviews for this story; it only confirmed some details of our reporting and offered written comments. This story is based on interviews with third parties involved in developing Obama's social-networking strategy or who were familiar with it, and on public records.

## **An Online Nervous System**

A row of elegant, renovated 19th-century industrial buildings lines Boston's Congress Street east of Fort Point Channel. On any given day, behind a plain wooden door on the third floor of 374 Congress, 15 to 20 casually clad programmers tap away at computers. On the day I visited, the strains of Creedence Clearwater Revival filled the room; a Ping-Pong table dominated the small kitchen. This is the technology center for Blue State Digital, which means that it is also the nervous system for its two largest clients, the Barack Obama campaign and the Democratic National Committee. Founded by alumni of the Dean campaign, Blue State Digital added interactive elements to Obama's website--including MyBO--and now tends to its daily care and feeding. The site's servers hum away in a Boston suburb and are backed up in the Chicago area.

Jascha Franklin-Hodge, 29, greeted me with a friendly handshake and a gap-toothed grin. He has a deep voice and a hearty laugh; his face is ringed by a narrow beard. Franklin-Hodge dropped out of MIT after his freshman year and spent a few years in online music startups before running the Internet infrastructure for the Dean campaign, which received a then--unprecedented \$27 million in online donations. "When the campaign ended, we thought, 'Howard Dean was not destined to be president, but what we are doing online--this is too big to let go away,'" he says. He and three others cofounded Blue State Digital, where he is chief technology officer. (Another cofounder, Joe Rospars, is now on leave with the Obama campaign as its new-media director.)

The MyBO tools are, in essence, rebuilt and consolidated versions of those created for the Dean campaign. Dean's website allowed supporters to donate

money, organize meetings, and distribute media, says Zephyr Teachout, who was Dean's Internet director and is now a visiting law professor at Duke University. "We developed all the tools the Obama campaign is using: SMS [text messaging], phone tools, Web capacity," Teachout recalls. "They [Blue State Digital] did a lot of nice work in taking this crude set of unrelated applications and making a complete suite."

Blue State Digital had nine days to add its tools to Obama's site before the senator announced his candidacy on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, IL. Among other preparations, the team braced for heavy traffic. "We made some projections of traffic levels, contribution amounts, and e-mail levels based on estimates from folks who worked with [John] Kerry and Dean in 2004," recalls Franklin--Hodge. As Obama's Springfield speech progressed, "we were watching the traffic go up and up, surpassing all our previous records." (He would not provide specific numbers.) It was clear that early assumptions were low. "We blew through all of those [estimates] in February," he says. "So we had to do a lot of work to make sure we kept up with the demand his online success had placed on the system." By July 2008, the campaign had raised more than \$200 million from more than a million online donors (Obama had raised \$340 million from all sources by the end of June), and MyBO had logged more than a million user accounts and facilitated 75,000 local events, according to Blue State Digital.

MyBO and the main campaign site made it easy to give money--the fuel for any campaign, because it pays for advertising and staff. Visitors could use credit cards to make one-time donations or to sign up for recurring monthly contributions. MyBO also made giving money a social event: supporters could set personal targets, run their own fund-raising efforts, and watch personal fund--raising thermometers rise. To bring people to the site in the first place, the campaign sought to make Obama a ubiquitous presence on as many new-media platforms as possible.

The viral Internet offered myriad ways to propagate unfiltered Obama messages. The campaign posted the candidate's speeches and linked to multimedia material generated by supporters. A music video set to an Obama speech--"Yes We Can," by the hip-hop artist Will.i.am--has been posted repeatedly on YouTube, but the top two postings alone have been viewed 10

million times. A single YouTube posting of Obama's March 18 speech on race has been viewed more than four million times. Similarly, the campaign regularly sent out text messages (at Obama rallies, speakers frequently asked attendees to text their contact information to his campaign) and made sure that Obama was prominent on other social-networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace (see "*New-Media King*" chart above). The campaign even used the micro-blogging service Twitter, garnering about 50,000 Obama "followers" who track his short posts. "The campaign, consciously or unconsciously, became much more of a media operation than simply a presidential campaign, because they recognized that by putting their message out onto these various platforms, their supporters would spread it for them," says Andrew Rasiej, founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, a website covering the intersection of politics and technology (and another Dean alumnus). "We are going from the era of the sound bite to the sound blast."

Money flowed in, augmenting the haul from big-ticket fund-raisers. By the time of the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, the Obama campaign had more than \$35 million on hand and was able to use MyBO to organize and instruct caucus-goers. "They have done a great job in being precise in the use of the tools," Teachout says. "In Iowa it was house parties, looking for a highly committed local network. In South Carolina, it was a massive get-out-the-vote effort." MyBO was critical both in the early caucus states, where campaign staff was in place, and in later--voting states like Texas, Colorado, and Wisconsin, where "we provided the tools, remote training, and opportunity for supporters to build the campaign on their own," the Obama campaign told *Technology Review* in a written statement. "When the campaign eventually did deploy staff to these states, they supplemented an already-built infrastructure and volunteer network."

Using the Web, the Obama camp turbocharged age-old campaign tools. Take phone banks: through MyBO, the campaign chopped up the task of making calls into thousands of chunks small enough for a supporter to handle in an hour or two. "Millions of phone calls were made to early primary states by people who used the website to reach out and connect with them," Franklin-Hodge says. "On every metric, this campaign has operated on a scale that has exceeded what has been done before. We facilitate actions of every sort: sending e-mails out to millions and millions of people, organizing tens of

thousands of events." The key, he says, is tightly integrating online activity with tasks people can perform in the real world. "Yes, there are blogs and Listservs," Franklin-Hodge says. "But the point of the campaign is to get someone to donate money, make calls, write letters, organize a house party. The core of the software is having those links to taking action--to doing something."

## **Pork Invaders**

If the other major candidates had many of the same Web tools, their experiences show that having them isn't enough: you must make them central to the campaign and properly manage the networks of supporters they help organize. Observers say that Clinton's campaign deployed good tools but that online social networks and new media weren't as big a part of its strategy; at least in its early months, it relied more on conventional tactics like big fund-raisers. After all, Clinton was at the top of the party establishment. "They [the Obama supporters] are chanting 'Yes we can,' and she's saying 'I don't need you,'" Trippi says. "That is what the top of that campaign said by celebrating Terry McAuliffe [the veteran political operative and former Democratic National Committee chairman] and how many millions he could put together with big, big checks. She doesn't need my \$25!" The two campaigns' fund-raising statistics support Trippi's argument: 48 percent of Obama's funds came from donations of less than \$200, compared with 33 percent of Clinton's, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Clinton's Internet director, Peter Daou, credits the Obama campaign with doing an "amazing job" with its online social network. "If there is a difference in how the two campaigns approached [a Web strategy], a lot of those differences were based on our constituencies," Daou says. "We were reaching a different demographic of supporters and used our tools accordingly." For example, he says, the Clinton campaign established a presence on the baby-boomer social-networking site Eons.com, and Clinton herself often urged listeners to visit [www.hillaryclinton.com](http://www.hillaryclinton.com). But Andrew Rasiej says that the conventional political wisdom questioned the value of the Internet. "As far as major political circles were concerned," he says, "Howard Dean failed, and therefore the Internet didn't work."

While it's hard to tease out how much Clinton's loss was due to her Web

strategy--and how much to factors such as her Iraq War vote and the half-generation difference between her and Obama's ages--it seems clear that her campaign deëmphasized Web strategy early on, Trippi says. Even if you "have all the smartest bottom-up, tech-savvy people working for you," he says, "if the candidate and the top of the campaign want to run a top-down campaign, there is nothing you can do. It will sit there and nothing will happen. That's kind of what happened with the Clinton campaign."

Republican Ron Paul had a different problem: Internet anarchy. Where the Obama campaign built one central network and managed it effectively, the Paul campaign decided early on that it would essentially be a hub for whatever networks the organizers were setting up. The results were mixed. On the one hand, volunteers organized successful "money bombs"--one-day online fund-raising frenzies (the one on November 5, 2007, netted Paul \$4.3 million). But sometimes the volunteers' energy--and money--was wasted, says Justine Lam, the Paul campaign's Internet director, who is now the online marketing director at Politicker.com. Consider the supporter-driven effort to hire a blimp emblazoned with "Who is Ron Paul? Google Ron Paul" to cruise up and down the East Coast last winter. "We saw all this money funding a blimp, and thought, 'We really need this money for commercials,'" Lam says.

Then there is McCain, who--somewhat ironically--was the big Internet story of 2000. That year, after his New Hampshire primary victory over George W. Bush, he quickly raised \$1 million online. And at times last year, he made effective use of the Internet. His staff made videos--such as "Man in the Arena," celebrating his wartime service--that gained popularity on YouTube. But the McCain site is ineffectual for social networking. In late June, when I tried to sign up on McCainSpace--the analogue to MyBO--I got error messages. When I tried again, I was informed that I would soon get a new password in my in-box. It never arrived. "His social-networking site was poorly done, and people found there was nothing to do on it," says Lam. "It was very insular, a walled garden. You don't want to keep people inside your walled garden; you want them to spread the message to new people."

McCain's organization is playing to an older base of supporters. But it seems not to have grasped the breadth of recent shifts in communications

technology, says David All, a Republican new-media consultant. "You have an entire generation of folks under age 25 no longer using e-mails, not even using Facebook; a majority are using text messaging," All says. "I get Obama's text messages, and every one is exactly what it should be. It is never pointless, it is always worth reading, and it has an action for you to take. You can have hundreds of recipients on a text message. You have hundreds of people trying to change the world in 160 characters or less. What's the SMS strategy for John McCain? None."

The generational differences between the Obama and McCain campaigns may be best symbolized by the distinctly retro "Pork Invaders," a game on the McCain site (it's also a Facebook application) styled after Space Invaders, the arcade game of the late 1970s. Pork Invaders allows you to fire bullets that say "veto" at slow-moving flying pigs and barrels.

But it's not that the campaign isn't trying to speak to the youth of today, as opposed to the youth of decades ago. Lately McCain has been having his daughter Meghan and two friends write a "bloggette" from the campaign trail. The bloggette site features a silhouette of a fetching woman in red high-heeled shoes. "It gives a hipper, younger perspective on the campaign and makes both of her parents seem hipper and younger," says Julie -Germany, director of the nonpartisan Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet at George Washington University. The McCain campaign did not reply to several interview requests, but Germany predicts that the campaign will exploit social networking in time to make a difference in November. "What we will see is that the McCain online campaign is using the Internet just as effectively to meet its goals as the Obama campaign," she says. Over the summer, the McCain campaign refreshed its website. But Rasiej, for one, doubts that McCain has enough time to make up lost ground.

### **A Networked White House?**

The obvious next step for MyBO is to serve as a get-out-the-vote engine in November. All campaigns scrutinize public records showing who is registered to vote and whether they have voted in past elections. The Obama campaign will be able to merge this data with MyBO data. All MyBO members' activity will have been chronicled: every house party they attended, each online connection, the date and amount of each donation. Rasiej sees how it might



play out: the reliable voters who signed up on MyBO but did little else may be left alone. The most active ones will be deployed to get the unreliable voters--whether MyBO members or not--to the polls. And personalized pitches can be dished up, thanks to the MyBO database. "The more contextual information they can provide the field operation, the better turnout they will have," he says.

If Obama is elected, his Web-oriented campaign strategy could carry over into his presidency. He could encourage his supporters to deluge members of Congress with calls and e-mails, or use the Web to organize collective research on policy questions. The campaign said in one of its prepared statements that "it's certain that the relationships that have been built between Barack Obama and his supporters, and between supporters themselves, will not end on Election Day." But whether or not a President Obama takes MyBO into the West Wing, it's clear that the phenomenon will forever transform campaigning. "We're scratching the surface," Trippi says. "We're all excited because he's got one million people signed up--but we are 300 million people in this country. We are still at the infancy stages of what social--networking technologies are going to do, not just in our politics but in everything. There won't be any campaign in 2012 that doesn't try to build a social network around it."

Lessig warns that if Obama wins but doesn't govern according to principles of openness and change, as promised, supporters may not be so interested in serving as MyBO foot soldiers in 2012. "The thing they [the Obama camp] don't quite recognize is how much of their enormous support comes from the perception that this is someone different," Lessig says. "If they behave like everyone else, how much will that stanch the passion of his support?"

But for now, it's party time. At the end of June, after Clinton suspended her campaign, MyBO put out a call for the faithful to organize house parties under a "Unite for Change" theme. More than 4,000 parties were organized nationwide on June 28; I logged in and picked three parties from about a dozen in the Boston area.

My first stop was a house party in the tony suburb of Winchester, where several couples dutifully watched an Obama-supplied campaign video. Host

Mary Hart, an art professor in her 50s, said that Obama and his website made her "open my house to strangers and really get something going." She added, "I'm e-mailing people I haven't seen in 20 years. We have this tremendous ability to use this technology to network with people. Why don't we use it?"

Next stop was a lawn party in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, whose organizer, Sachielle Samedi, 34, wore a button that said "Hot Chicks Dig Obama." She said that support for the Obama candidacy drew neighbors together. At the party, Wayne Dudley, a retired history professor, met a kindred spirit: Brian Murdoch, a 54-year-old Episcopal priest. The two men buttonholed me for several minutes; Dudley predicted that Obama would bring about "a new world order centered on people of integrity." Murdoch nodded vigorously. It was a fine MyBO moment.

My evening ended at a packed post-collegiate party in a Somerville walk-up apartment. Host Rebecca Herst, a 23-year-old program assistant with the Jewish Organizing Initiative, said that MyBO--unlike Facebook--allowed her to quickly upload her entire Gmail address book, grafting her network onto Obama's. "It will be interesting to see what develops after this party, because now I'm connected to all these people," she shouted over the growing din. Two beery young men, heading for the exits, handed her two checks for \$20. Herst tucked the checks into her back pocket.

David Talbot is *Technology Review's* chief correspondent.

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## Upcoming Events

### **AVS 55th International Symposium and Exhibition**

Boston, MA

Sunday, October 19, 2008 - Friday, October 24, 2008

<http://www2.avs.org/symposium>

### **2008 Medical Innovation Summit**

Cleveland, Ohio

Monday, November 10, 2008 - Wednesday, November 12, 2008

<http://www.clevelandclinic.org/innovations/summit>

### **MITX Awards**

Boston, Massachusetts

Wednesday, November 19, 2008

<http://www.mitxawards.org/>

### **WHIT 4.0**

Washington, DC

Monday, December 08, 2008 - Wednesday, December 10, 2008

<http://www.whitcongress.com>

### **EmTech08**

MIT Campus, Cambridge, MA

Tuesday, September 23, 2008 - Thursday, September 25, 2008

<http://www.technologyreview.com/emtech/08/>