THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESIDENT

BARACK OBAMA AND THE POLITICS OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

JAMES E. KATZ, MICHAEL BARRIS, and ANSHUL JAIN

Reviews of *The Social Media President: Barack Obama and the Politics of Digital Engagement*:

"The Social Media President is a fascinating and instructive analysis and critique of the use of social media by President Obama. I heartily recommend it." - Fred I. Greenstein, Professor of Politics Emeritus, Princeton University, USA

"Obama's political campaign machine broke all sorts of fundraising records and media outreach goals. But as The Social Media President reveals, the more important and lasting story has to do with the transformation of the office of the presidency. There are important differences between the role of digital media in Obama's campaign and his administration. These authors reveal that while some presidential initiatives have made innovative use of social media, even the highest political office holder in the land can't crowd-source everything." - Philip N. Howard, Professor, University of Washington, USA

"The Social Media President productively brings together political communication's recent emphasis on the role of social media in presidential campaigning with an oft-overlooked study of the role of technology in governance. … In moving the space of inquiry from campaigns to governance, the authors succeed in highlighting problems that are particular to the space of governance while also revealing many of the overlapping conditions that plague both worlds." - Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, Assistant Professor and Graduate Director of Master's program in Public Media, Fordham University, USA, in *Information, Communication & Society*

Product Description

The proliferation of social media has altered the way that people interact with each other - leveling the channels of communication to allow an individual to be "friends" with a sitting president. In a world where a citizen can message Barack Obama directly, this book addresses the new channels of communication in politics, and what they offer.
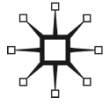
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CONTENTS

Part III   Perspectives and Outlook on the Social Media President

FRAMING THE "PEOPLE'S WHITE HOUSE": CROWDSOURCING AND THE CITIZEN'S BRIEFING BOOK

The next several chapters delve more deeply into the Obama Administration's practices for digital engagement, considering in finer detail how these practices use social media to gather, broadcast, and collaboratively engage political infor- mation. We cover several mini-case studies, "counterfactual" examples of social media input, and a sampling of White House and Obama Administration social media initiatives. This chapter looks at a Transition Team social media engagement experiment, while later chapters examine the Obama Administration once it came to power.

EXPECTATIONS OF CHANGING THE WAY WASHINGTON WORKS

In the weeks after the 2008 election, the notion that America might be on the threshold of a new era of citizen participation in governmental decision-making excited technology enthusiasts. That view was due partly to the Obama team's highly effective use of social networking sites to gain power, as well as to the huge following of Internet-savvy supporters who helped put the first African-American US president in office.

David Carr, the *New York Times* media columnist, wrote that the incoming president would have "not just a political base, but a database, millions of names of supporters who can be engaged almost instantly." And, Carr continued, "There's every reason to believe that he will use the network not just to campaign, but to govern. His e-mail message to supporters on Tuesday night [election night] included the line, 'We have a lot of work to do to get our country back on track, and I'll be in touch soon about what comes next.'"[1] Such words lifted the hopes of those who yearned for change in the way the nation's capital did business; and indeed, President Obama would soon be "back in touch" with the American people to address that issue.

THE WHITE HOUSE WEBSITE SETS THE TONE

In the beginning, the most visible symbol of change in Washington, aside from Obama himself, was the website of the White House, www.WhiteHouse.gov. Redesigned just prior to Obama's inauguration, the site tried to humanize the image of the President's residence while reinvesting it with elegance. WhiteHouse.gov reflected the tone that

Obama himself had set during the campaign: its language was upbeat, but not excessively hyperbolic; its format was eye-catching, but not overly pretentious. Most significantly, the site's home page included links to such social media tools as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, MySpace, and YouTube, implying a desire to connect with the public. There also was a feature called the White House blog, ostensibly a symbol of the new openness and transparency in the chief executive's office.

One interesting feature was the splash (startup) screen that welcomed first-time visitors to the White House webpage and asked them to leave their email addresses so they could receive updates and further information. Though optional, visitors had to either accept or decline the invitation before they were allowed to proceed to the webpage. This arrangement further reinforced the impression that the Obama Administration was interested in using "push" social media to get its message out to the public. The fact that one was asked to sign up ("opt-in") to receive electronic communications from the White House could easily be construed as subtle pressure to agree to be contacted in the future. Though sophisticated people may well have recognized that choosing to withhold one's personal information from the White House may not have influenced the availability of information being sought, or some future treatment by the government, there was no way to ensure that this would not be the case for less sophisticated visitors.[2]

Thus, the nature of the splash page was one-way communication: you could get a message *from* the Administration, but there was no easy way to get a message *to* the Administration. While this in itself was not surprising, since all large organiza- tions look for ways to lower the resource demands required to serve unique customer needs, it did highlight the yawning gap between the aspirations of easy access and the realities of fending off distractions while pursuing political objectives. Finally, in the early days of the Obama Administration, a form was available on the website that allowed people to ask questions, but this disappeared quickly, as even automatic sorting systems were overwhelmed by the volume of requests.

CROWDSOURCING'S EMERGENCE: DREAMS OF SOLUTIONS TO GOVERNMENTAL PROBLEMS

As the Obama era began, or was about to begin, attempts were made to engage citizens in the presidency through projects that, in one form or another, exemplified "crowdsourcing." The term, coined by journalist Jeff Howe in the June 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine, described a web-based business model that "harnesses the cre- ative solutions of a distributed network of individuals through what amounts to an open call for proposals."[3] Daren Brabham has extolled crowdsourcing as a problem- solving tool that can "harness the collective intelligence of the crowd" to benefit government projects.[4]

In classic crowdsourcing, an open call for solutions to a problem goes out to a large mass of potential solvers. The solvers form an online community, and the sourcing organization and the crowd both submit and filter solutions, searching for the superior ones. On the one hand, it is argued, crowdsourcing permits the rapid, and relatively

inexpensive, exploration of problems by a wide, external talent pool, allowing solvers to build a kinship with the crowdsourcing organization. On the other hand, it can produce results of inconsistent quality, and has raised some con- cern among trade unions, given its sourcing of cheap—or even free—labor.[5]

Another concern about crowdsourcing is its scalability. Large corporations use it to solve problems drawing on employees from their global workforces. But could it work on a national scale for a contentious issue, such as decision-making on the healthcare initiative under the Obama Administration? Howe told us that he did not think so, but thought someone might be able to convince him that it would. Yet he did admit that it could work on a state-wide level, explaining, "It is at that local level I think that it can be really effective. I think even the state level starts pushing it."[6]

One pre-Obama application of federal-government crowdsourcing, or more accurately, peer production via collaborative democracy, was the Peer-to-Patent Community Patent Review project for the US Patent and Trademark Office (men- tioned briefly in the Appendix). Peer-to-Patent was announced in 2006, during the Bush Administration's second term, and developed by Beth Noveck, who would eventually become Obama's Deputy Chief Technology Officer for Open Government. Peer-to-Patent engaged "citizen experts" to supply the patent and trademark office with information relevant to assessing the claims of pending pat- ent applications.[7] Noveck's idea caught the attention of Obama's campaign staff and "in his campaign's technology platform, President Barack Obama called for incorporating Peer-to-Patent into the US PTO's regular procedure."[8] (The Patent Office had a seven-figure backlog of patents at that time, and serious questions were raised about the adequacy of examiners' expertise in light of a wide range of topics.[9]) Noveck's aspiration was to use digital tools to create what she describes as collaborative democracy, explaining, "Unlike crowdsourcing, which aggregates the responses or preferences of individuals throughout a network, collaborative demo- cracy emphasizes shared work by a government institution and a network of par- ticipants."[10] Her model, however, depends on expertise and detailed involvement of trained and committed individuals, although she also asserts information might come from nontraditional sources, such as a "person [who] may be an expert on wetlands because she lives near one."[11] Her approach influenced the Expert Labs/ Grand Challenges scientific outreach, an example of crowdsourcing combined with participatory democracy that will be discussed later.

The Citizen's Briefing Book

In late 2008, after Obama won the election and was preparing to take power, the Transition Team was busy not only laying plans for the new Administration, but taking steps to articulate the vision of hope, change, and citizen engagement that had been part of the campaign. The Transition Team dubbed its website "Change. gov" with the subtitle "The Office of the President-Elect" (and quickly dropping a much-mocked special "president-elect" emblem to accompany it). One of the team's early steps was to declare

that the people would have both the opportunity and capacity to participate to some degree in setting policy priorities and have ready access to the same information that was received by the Transition Team members.

TRANSPARENCY AND A SEAT AT THE TABLE

On December 5, 2008, John D. Podesta, the Obama-Biden Transition Project co-chair, set the bar high in terms of citizen access and involvement. He announced that all policy documents from official meetings with outside organizations would be publicly available for review and discussion on Change.gov. He thus kicked off an initiative that was called, "Your seat at the table." The website declared "we're inviting the American public to take a seat at the table and engage in a dialogue about these important issues and ideas—at the same time members of our team review these documents themselves."[12]

Michael Strautmanis, the Administration's Director of Public Liaison and Inter-governmental Affairs, commented on the Transition Team's website,

> Our role really is to open doors of the transition and give people the opportunity to come in and talk to us. We're doing things differently. We're posting all the mate- rials that come into us on change.gov. You have an opportunity to respond to the things that other people are saying, to the things that other people are presenting. Transparency is the process that leads to real change. And transparency is the process by which people have confidence that things are really going to be different, that they will have that seat at the table.[13]

Julius Genachowski, co-chair of the Transition Team's working group on Technology, Information and Government Reform, explained that one of the group's goals was to develop a platform that "catalyzes active citizenship and partnerships in shared governance with civil society institutions."[14]

Though the words were lofty, it was unclear just how open the process was and to what extent official meetings allowed for public input. But again, the stated objec- tives for procedures set a standard by which the Obama Administration, once it took power, could be judged in terms of transparency (and not just transparency's existence as a bureaucratic policy but also, as outlined by Michael Strautmanis, its significance for citizen engagement and governance) once it took office. However, one mechanism that was put into place to gather citizen views, and to give voice to proceedings, if not necessarily a "seat at the table," is discussed next, namely the Citizen's Briefing Book.

CITIZEN'S BRIEFING BOOK: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

The Transition Team's Citizen's Briefing Book (CBB) was a broad-based attempt at crowdsourcing. Visitors to the Transition Team's site were invited to post recom-mendations for changes they wanted to see made in the governing of the United States, and they were also able to vote on other users' recommendations, as well as participate in

a comment process. The collected ideas were to be presented to President Obama in book form after his inauguration.

Reside, a Minneapolis-based company, helped develop the software for the CBB, using technology from partner Salesforce.com, a maker of software that helps man- age customer information about sales, marketing, and customer support.[15] Valerie Jarrett, the Transition Team's co-chair, informed viewers in a YouTube video that the CBB was a way for the transition process to remain "open and transparent."

Jarrett said, "Hundreds of thousands of you have sent in suggestions, ideas, and you've shared your personal stories. And we've thought of a way of bringing per- sonal stories and suggestions directly to the President, and it's going to be called the Citizen's Briefing Book."[16]

The CBB would be a way to communicate "ideas and suggestions" from citizens "directly to him (Obama)," the transition co-chair said. She added that "your par- ticipation is key to our success."

Jarrett asked viewers to log on to Change.gov and "give us your ideas." The topics could be "energy, health care, reduction of our dependence on foreign oil, you decide whatever is important to you." She added, "Others will then be able to read your ideas and make comments and suggestions. You may even hear from the Transition Team." She explained further, "After we've compiled them all, the most highly rated sugges- tions will rise to the top and we'll include them in a Briefing Book for the President. The Citizen's Briefing Book will come directly from the American people."

Jarrett closed by summing up the planned exercise as "yet another way we will ensure that this transition is the most open and transparent one yet. You have par- ticipated in truly inspiring numbers," she said. "We hope that will be the case for the Obama-Biden Administration too. We need your help. We want to hear from you. Thank you."

Jarrett's message was in line with the idea of putting government in the people's hands, particularly when she added, "You have participated in truly inspiring num- bers. We hope that will be the case for the Obama-Biden Administration, too." Noteworthy about these remarks was their personal tone, and her emphasis on "you," the viewer/contributor. There also was an attempt to empower the viewer, through her words, "you decide whatever is important to you." The simplicity of the language was also notable, suggesting an attempt to reach out to a wide cross-section of people, including those who might be only minimally familiar with or who might not know how to use mediated communication. In short, this introduction prom- ised great leaps in American government, with social media bringing the wisdom of the crowd to decision makers.

Results of the Exercise

On Friday, January 16, 2009, three days before Obama's inauguration, a blog post- ing on Change.gov by Dan McSwain, an Obama Transition Team staffer, called the CBB a "tremendous success."[17] The blog said the CBB "enabled everyday Americans to share their expertise and insight with President Obama." In a video posted on YouTube,

Strautmanis said more than 70,000 people participated in the CBB, cast- ing half a million votes, and offering "tens of thousands of wonderful ideas."[18] Yet, though initial attitudes were positive, the Transition Team later began to feel dis- couraged. In our interview with him, McSwain said, "At the time I was personally frustrated with the Citizen's Briefing Book because I thought it could have played a bigger role or it could have been distilled in a more powerful way. Or something like that."[19] He also noted that this process was much more difficult than it may have seemed from the outside, explaining, "there was no way for the executive office to take public comments like this. And because of things like the Paperwork Reduction Act, setting up a platform to accept comments that then become some kind of gov- ernmental record is really difficult."[20]

The completed CBB, however, was not released until nearly four months later. It was finally unveiled on May 11, 2009, coinciding with the announced renam- ing of the Bush Administration's Office of Public Liaison as the Office of Public Engagement (OPE). The renaming sought to reflect the Obama Administration's hope that the office would be the point of contact for citizens as they interacted with the executive branch.

As a press release said, the OPE would "help build relationships with Americans by increasing their meaningful engagement with the federal government." Serving as "the front door to the White House," OPE, the release said, "will allow ordinary Americans to offer their stories and ideas regarding issues that concern them and share their views on important topics such as health care, energy and education." In addition to its traditional White House operations, OPE would now also focus on "getting information from the American people outside the Washington beltway through special public events as well as activities on the website." The office, it said, "will have a strong on-line presence, including blog postings from OPE staff and other interactive elements."

The OPE's first official act was to release the finished CBB.[21] The introduction to the 32-page booklet echoed Jarrett's sentiments of months earlier, as well as those of the OPE name-change press release, pointing out that the idea of the CBB was to create a "grassroots version of the research binders that presidents receive every day." Instead of advice from top government officials, the CBB was presenting "ideas sub- mitted by ordinary people and reflecting the enthusiastic engagement from the pub- lic we saw throughout the course of Change.gov." The introduction said "125,000 users submitted over 44,000 ideas and cast over 1.4 million votes, with the most popular ideas accumulating tens of thousands of votes each."

The completed CBB contained "some of the top ideas, broken into groups by issue area." Each idea's popularity was indicated by a number that appeared next to it, representing how many people voted for the idea, with ten points awarded for each positive vote. In addition, a "word cloud" for each category of ideas represented the "frequency with which various words and concepts appeared through the entire process." The introduction concluded by saying, "out of the tens of thousands of submissions, these ideas found the most support; here they are, unvarnished and unedited." Some top CBB ideas, by category, are shown in table 4.1.

What was apparent in the CBB was that, though it brimmed with proposals and

votes, it lacked novel thinking and the potential to set a new direction for the Administration. There were no thrilling breakthrough ideas among the top vote getters. Instead, they were well-trod issues of candidate Obama's core supporters, and for the most part themes previously endorsed by him. The ideas topping the

Table 4.1 Top-rated Citizen's Briefing Book ideas (January 2009)

Economy

- Revoke the George W. Bush tax cuts for the top 1%. (57,080 points)

- Let's make reduced-scale farming profitable! Less dependence on imported foods! (42,070 points)

- More stimulus focus on green jobs. (30,470 points)

Education

- An end to government-sponsored abstinence education to be replaced by an introduction of age-appropriate sex education. (65,350 points)

- Focus on the arts and creativity. (12,970 points)

- Libraries of all types need our support. (10,810 points)

Energy & Environment

- Commit to becoming the "greenest" country in the world. (70,470 points)

- Bullet trains and light rail. (65,100 points)

Foreign Policy

- Permanent closure of all torture facilities (such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib). (61,250 points)

- Reevaluate aid to Israel. (37,240 points)

Health Care

- Stop using federal resources to undermine states' medicinal marijuana laws. (66,170 points)

- Get the insurance companies out of health care. (55,080 points)

Homeland Security

- No more wars on abstract concepts. (38,250 points)

- Eliminate "Don't Ask, Don't Tell": so we don't lose any more soldiers. (35,840 points)

Technology

- Boost America's economy with legal online poker. (46,890 points)

- Restore net neutrality protections to the Internet. (46,220 points)

- Vote and debate all bills online and show what industries contribute the most to each representative's campaign. (40,080 points)

- Each of the 50 state governors should create a version of this site to gather ideas from their constituents. (25,730 points)

- National Wi-Fi. (23,540 points)

Additional Issues

- End marijuana prohibition. (92,970 points)

- Revoke the tax exempt status of the Church of Scientology. (52,470 points)

- People talking to government. (41,740 points)

- Marriage equality. (26,400 points)

- Bush Administration investigation. (23,820 points)[22]

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list included more spending for light rail, solar power, a green environment, and education. They also included items seeking to repudiate Bush Administration poli- cies. These issues were at the core of candidate Obama's Democratic base support. Special and single-cause interests were also well represented: libraries, small farms, anti-Scientology, pro-Internet poker, pro-gay, and pro-marijuana. Among the top- ranked items was a clear urge to use technology for access to levers of governmental powers. Examples included "people talking to government," national Wi-Fi, hav- ing governors offer citizen-input opportunities similar to the CBB, and voting and debating "all bills online." Opinions in favor of legalizing marijuana showed up in different places and, as a foreshadowing, would continue to do so.

Once the exercise was completed, the project managers were confronted with what to do with all the information. They wanted to make it public, of course, but how should the information be used to affect Obama Administration policy? One challenge they had was taking all of this information and making it meaningful and useful for the Administration. Dan McSwain said, "There is lots of feedback com- ing in from the

citizens. How do we distill that feedback and pass it on to decision makers and administrators in a meaningful way? And at the same time show the public that their considerations, concerns, and questions are being seen? I think this is probably still one of the most challenging questions."

Word clouds were used, McSwain said, because it was important to get "everyone involved in the transition to understand what was going on with the top-line thirty-thousand foot view so we could see what was a hot topic for people. But I think that parsing all of that information was really challenging. Word clouds were an ineffective way of doing that. It leaves a lot to be desired."[23] The President, speaking of the CBB in a YouTube video, was ambiguous in his presentation of the results of this exercise. He noted that "many of the ideas [the public] offered, from improving light rail transit, to modernizing our energy grid, to a new national service corps," had "been embraced by my Administration."[24] On the one hand, this comment could have been taken to mean that the public's feedback helped to set a new direction for the government; on the other hand, it could have meant that the public's input helped to reaffirm an existing position. Evidence for the latter is the fact that all of these initiatives had been endorsed well before the CBB exercise. This suggests that the response was a post hoc justification for actions already intended.

If Obama's aim was to avoid appearing too committed to one position or the other, ambiguity was a good strategy. To the extent that any items appearing in the CBB were previously favored by candidate Obama, it was easy to point to the book as a rationale for pursuing them. In the event that President Obama wished to defer acting on any such items, it was equally easy to ignore them. But beyond their being easily manipulated, it was noteworthy that none of the items in the CBB prompted a novel policy direction. In fact, as we noted, and which will become a recurring theme, the government's follow-up moves suggested an effort to justify stances already taken, or to remain vague when it suited politicians' or staff members' purposes. For example, shortly after the CBB's release, video replies to some of the more popular suggestions were made by White House officials and posted on YouTube. In a nearly four-minute clip, Nancy Sutley, Obama's then chair-designee for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, addressed the topics of mass transit, energy efficiency, and green jobs, but disclosed few legislative details, aside from mentioning that the forthcoming economic stimulus plan would respond to these concerns.[25]

Although the CBB gave the impression of expanding the public's access to a presidential administration, Sam Stein, a columnist for the liberal-leaning *Huffington Post* website, noted "the engagement" went only so far. "There remains," Stein wrote, "a crucial limitation on follow-up interactions, whether it be about policy pitches or question, unless another user picks up the baton."[26] For instance, Stein noted that *ABC* television journalist George Stephanopoulos, taking his cue from the CBB, asked Obama whether the incoming president would consider prose- cuting members of the Bush Administration for breaches of the Constitution in connection with the use of torture to interrogate military prisoners tied to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New

York and Washington. Stein noted that "Obama fielded the question—his website, citing a policy of not commenting on national security matters during the transition, had offered a previous response from [Vice President] Joe Biden—but then was pressed twice more to explain his answer." These observations illustrated how the ideas of citizen participation and transparency inherent in the Obama campaign may not have fit well with post- campaign reality.

The credibility of the CBB itself was questionable in light of the arbitrary ten-point system used to evaluate its biggest issues and the ease with which interest groups could attempt to stuff the virtual "ballot boxes." Nancy Scola, a blogger for *techPresident*, noted that a weakness of the CBB was that it allowed "for linking to individual ideas, making it easier for activists to rally support for their contributions."[27]

Impact of Report

So the question remained: What was the purpose of the CBB? The Obama team invested significant effort in making ordinary people feel as if their views had been registered, but, of course, the participants could not be considered representative of anyone but themselves. Nor was there any commitment to act on any of the pro- posals. So, it may have been that the site designers thought that the mere sense of "being heard" was sufficient to meet, or at least a first step toward meeting, the goal of citizen involvement via social media. (And in this they are probably not mistaken, at least in terms of the majority of users.) As will be noted later, many citizens who engage in social media for setting policy directions understand they will not neces- sarily have an impact; but just having an opportunity to register their views can be satisfying. We have heard this not only from users in interviews, but also from insiders, including Macon Phillips, the White House Director of New Media.[28] David Almacy, the White House Internet and E-Communications Director under President George W. Bush, also perceived this to be the case. He told us that people get psychological pleasure "when you do these online poll kind of things or when you give people the perception that when they email in they are reaching the high- est echelons of politics and impacting policy." However, rather than changing anything, "you get credit for just having those channels open."[29]

Dan McSwain also felt that this exercise allowed them to change the internal infrastructure dramatically so that future interactions could occur:

> I think looking back, the real accomplishment was actually the infrastructural part. Getting in a platform that could take all of these questions that we could assemble some of the data and then keep these records as the executive agency in a government tech regulatory environment that really didn't know how to handle stuff like this. That was a huge accomplishment. And I think we were all kind of amped up on just having won that—we were not really appreciating these challenges for what they were. But now a few years on and having gone through a lot of battles during my time at the FCC and watching my friends continue to do it I realized that was a very significant win even if it didn't feel like it at the time. So I'm happy for that aspect of it.

McSwain said the exercise also broke down some barriers in attitudes within the White House:

> The infrastructure changes were very significant but they also led to a change in understanding for the Administration about what these tools could really do...I think that myself included and some of our colleagues were very impatient with that at the beginning because to us it just seems like the logical next step. And we couldn't really understand why some of the more risk adverse parts of the Administration felt the way that they seemed to feel about these things. But I think that they've come around in a really positive way.

The former Obama campaign strategist does think that some issues still remain. "And now that a lot of the tech barriers have either been lifted or demolished I think there are still some cultural barriers inside the White House about how these tools can be leveraged," he said.

"Did the Citizen's Briefing Book directly impact policy?" McSwain asked. "I have no way of knowing that. But did it achieve the goal of showing people both inside the Administration and citizens that technology was going to enable a two-way flow of information to the executive branch in a way that had never happened before? Yeah, I think the Citizen's Briefing Book was part of that overall effort that enabled that."[30]

CONCLUSION

The CBB was launched amid promises of expanded opportunities for public input in policy discussion. In one sense, the experience of the CBB illustrates that the potential exists to create, manage, and maintain some of the critical infrastructure for collaborative engagement. More importantly, the exercise also demonstrated a pattern of implementation that more convincingly incorporated the modalities of information gathering and agenda broadcasting by the White House.

In the next chapter, we will turn to another White House crowdsourcing experiment: the Online Town Hall. This exercise had the potential to provide a meaning- ful two-way communication forum and to be valuable in spurring direct citizen involvement in setting policy. The analysis will suggest that, once again, this was an opportunity that did not end up realizing its full potential.

CHAPTER 5

WHITE HOUSE ONLINE TOWN HALL

Billed as "the first of its kind" online, the White House Online Town Hall, held March 26, 2009, allowed questions submitted by ordinary Americans via the web to be paired with those from a live White House audience. President Obama would answer each question in detail over the course of the 75-minute event.

SEEKING TO ENGAGE THE AMERICAN PUBLIC VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

"President Obama is trying to talk directly to the American people, these days," reported the *New York Times*, "making the case for his ambitious agenda in forums as varied as Jay Leno's late-night television show and a news conference on Tuesday. Now Mr. Obama will have a chance at even more direct engagement," the *Times* continued, "in what the White House is billing as the first Internet video news conference by an American president."[1]

Truth be told, Obama was not the first president to engage in online chats with ordinary Americans: former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had both answered questions over the Internet. Clinton likened the virtual town hall meeting at which he presided in November 1999 to Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats and John F. Kennedy's live-TV news conferences. He praised the use of "the most modern technology for...old-fashioned communication between the American people and their president."[2]

Obama, however, was the first to communicate in a live video format, streamed directly from the White House website. The event's importance was further elevated because, following the success of his 2008 election campaign, the President's use of social media was news in and of itself.

The virtual town hall came just three months after the President, in his first executive act, issued a "Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government" that stated: "We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration." Openness, the short note added, "will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government."[3]

To kick off the initiative, the White House website posted a short video introduction by President Obama that invited public participation. Obama described the initiative this way:

One of my priorities as President is opening up the White House to the American people so that folks can understand what we're up to and have a chance to participate themselves....We're going to try something a little bit different....We are going to take advantage of the Internet to bring all of you to the White House to talk about the economy....Anyone can submit a question about the economy or vote on other questions.[4]

The Online Town Hall was promoted on WhiteHouse.gov under a banner reading "The White House is Open for Questions." All told, by the time the exercise was completed, 92,937 people submitted 103,978 questions and cast 1,782,650 votes (votes were allowed for more than one item), according to the White House website.[5] "Taking a page, perhaps, from reality television shows like American Idol," which invited viewers to vote for their favorite contestant in a singing competition, the *Times* reported, "the White House has asked Americans to vote on their favorite questions."

The President opened the online town meeting by declaring, "When I was running for president, I promised to open the White House for the American people. This is an important step toward achieving that goal." Obama then launched into a long prefatory statement on his programs and their progress.[6] This was followed by a series of screened questions that covered the well-trod ground of education, housing, and the economy. Jared Bernstein, Chief Economist and Economic Policy Adviser to Vice President Biden, acted as the "facilitator" for the meeting, selecting and reading out the questions, which were shown on huge video screens in corners of the East Room. Two video-recorded questions also were selected and played for Obama. As the President answered each question, he directed his remarks mainly to the live audience in the room.

The President answered six questions submitted online, including the two sent in by video, and another six from some of the 100 handpicked guests identified by the White House as "teachers, nurses, small business owners and community leaders." Obama also decided to answer a seventh online question—about whether marijuana should be legalized—that was not chosen by Bernstein.

Among the variety of questions, the one concerning the legalization of mari- juana was visibly the most popular, voted upon by visitors across the many catego- ries of topics, including green jobs and financial stability. A typical question was: "Mr. Obama, thank you for allowing us to ask our questions to you, unfiltered. What is your stance on legalizing marijuana federally, taxing it and regulating [it] much like alcohol and tobacco? I believe that the Drug War has failed, and needs overhaul."

According to *Los Angeles Times* blogger David Sarno, "some of us expected Obama to sidestep the politically sensitive topic." President Obama, Sarno observed, instead slipped his response in between questions from Bernstein. Although Bernstein and Obama had originally agreed to answer the most popular question, Sarno nonetheless gave the President extra credit for going "out of his way" to take the question "head on"[7], as shown in the White House transcript:

> *The President*: Can I just interrupt, Jared, before you ask the next question, just to say that we—we took votes about which questions were going to be asked and I think 3

million people voted or—

Dr. Bernstein: Three point five million.

The President: Three point five million people voted. I have to say that there was one question that was voted on that ranked fairly high and that was whether legaliz- ing marijuana would improve the economy—(laughter)—and job creation. And I don't know what this says about the online audience—(laughter)—but I just want—I don't want people to think that—this was a fairly popular question; we want to make sure that it was answered. The answer is, no, I don't think that is a good strategy—(laughter)—to grow our economy. (Applause.)[8]

CRITICS EVALUATE THE ONLINE TOWN HALL

In the end, no tough or probing questions were posed (which is a clear advantage of calling upon "ordinary citizens" to pose questions to a president). Mitch Wagner, a blogger for *Information Week*, observed that even though the White House selected questions by asking citizens to vote on them in advance using a crowdsourcing tool based on Google Moderator, "the questions (Obama) answered were pretty much the same ones you'd expect to see in any forum, Web 2.0 or otherwise."[9] Jose Antonio Vargas, who blogs about the presidency for the *Washington Post*, compared the virtual town hall to "a press conference streamed via the web" with the "same stock of generalized, predictable questions answered by the same stock of general- ized, tried-and-tested policy responses."[10]

Like the Citizen's Briefing Book (CBB), the Online Town Hall appeared to portray the Administration as sharing power with citizens, but it also showed the President using his social media platform to build support for established positions. The tone for this exercise was set when, before taking questions, President Obama spoke about his economic recovery plan. The cadence, syntax, and language of his speech made it sound as if it belonged in an election campaign:

> "We, as a nation, have already begun the critical work that will lead to our economic recovery," Obama said. "It's a recovery that will be measured by whether jobs are being created and families have more money to pay their bills at the end of each month. That's why we're preventing teachers and police officers from being laid off, and putting Americans to work rebuilding our crumbling roads and bridges and dams, creating or saving 3.5 million jobs in the coming years. And that's why we're putting a tax cut into the pockets of 95 percent of working families who will see that tax cut in their paycheck by April 1st."[11]

In light of the Online Town Hall's billing as a vehicle for conversation between the President and the public, critics looked askance at what to them seemed like Obama's rhetoric-laced attempt to whip up enthusiasm for his plan to revitalize the economy, which was inappropriate, not to mention anathematic to two-way communication.

Actions like these prompted one detractor to say Obama's use of social media "looks like one of those corporate all-hands planning meetings where the employees are told that everyone will be listened to and all ideas are on the table—and the decision at the end is pretty much exactly the same as what the bosses figured out before the meeting started."[12]

The Online Town Hall's design as a television event raised further questions about its credibility as a vehicle for dialogue between the President and the citizenry. Throughout the proceedings, video screens showed the name of the crowdsourcing tool, "Open for Questions," like a brand. However, it was difficult to understand how a meaningful dialogue could take place if multiple questions could be posed without an opportunity for substantive discussion or interaction due to the tight time limits.