Barack to the future

Published on 19 November 2008

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Barack Obama's election bid harnessed technology as never before. *E&T* evaluates the world's first 'open source' campaign.

If you want to understand the scale of Barack Obama's historic election victory, just look at the numbers. I'm not just talking about the 52.5 per cent of the popular vote and the 364 electoral votes he won on 4 November, but the 2,818,410 supporters he has on Facebook, the 870,093 MySpace users who call him friend and the 126,225 people following his every Twitter.

The campaign's website, MyBarackObama.com, has more than 1.5 million accounts and was used to promote over 150,000 events. It acted as focal point for the three million private donations that helped Obama raise $650m – more than twice what Bush and Gore managed, combined, in 2000.

Barack Obama isn't just President Elect of the United States of America, he's an Internet icon who has been downloaded, linked, quoted, advertised and funded online more than any other person in the world, ever. This didn't happen by accident. Technology was at the heart of every stage of the campaign, and it was technology – as much as his policies, his charisma and his opponents – that helped him win.

The story starts back in 2001, with the creation of a little-known company called Voter Activation Network (VAN). This data-integration specialist, based in Boston, was given the task of cleaning voter lists for Democratic Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa. Soon the young company was compiling massive databases of potential voters across the US, including their demographics and voting history.

For years, campaign workers from the grass roots level right up to Washington have been feeding information into the system. VAN now manages the data-crunching 'back end' of nearly every Democratic campaign in America. During the campaign, its invaluable data was used to drive activity through MyBarackObama.com and state VAN networks.

A 'Neighbor-to-Neighbor' online tool, for instance, encouraged volunteers to make targeted phone calls to homes in marginal states in their spare time. Flexible resources like this enabled Obama campaigners to make over two million calls during the primary season alone, helping him to defeat Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination.

With his Presidential campaign in full swing, Obama began broadcasting his message in cyberspace. Facebook and MySpace pages are a given in today's digital age, but Obama went a leap further, targeting crucial niche communities via their social networks. Venture online and you'll find an official Barack Obama presence on the MiGente (Latinos) website, FaithBase (Christians), Eons (baby boomers), AsianAve (Asian-Americans), Glee (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) and, naturally, BlackPlanet.

Obama's social networking

Fancy a job in the new administration? You could do worse than stopping by Barack's LinkedIn page – he has over 500 well-placed connections. And if all you want is to sit back and admire the man, you'll find 1,821 videos on his dedicated YouTube channel and over 50,000 images, including lovely shots of his family, on his regularly updated Flickr photostream.

To woo the gaming generation, Barack popped up in the online world Second Life and even paid to advertise in EA's racing game 'Burnout Paradise'. And that's before you even consider the record $8m he spent on online advertising, $3m of it with Google alone.

While impressive, this activity represents little more than a scaling up and moving online of traditional electioneering. The revolutionary tactic of the Obama campaign was the shift from merely exposing its candidate to the public, to getting voters energised enough to work for him.

In traditional campaigns, volunteers are culled from local political parties and organisations, and their activities are supervised. Obama threw that aside in favour of the direct, semi-personal communications and self-organising networks that are at the heart of Web 2.0.

Over 2.9 million Americans signed up to get an 'exclusive' text message from Obama revealing his choice of vice-president. Tens of thousands downloaded ringtones, wallpapers and even an iPhone application that scanned their address book for contacts living in

battleground states, suggesting that people canvass them personally.

MyBarackObama.com, built by Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, extended the concept still further. Visitors were encouraged to set fund-raising goals, thermometers gauging their efforts. Creating and joining activist groups was easy, and there are now over 35,000.

Obama's has been dubbed the first 'peer-to-peer, open source' campaign. That may be stretching the truth, but the contrast between Obama's slick high-tech race and his Arizona rival's under-funded and ponderous campaign couldn't be clearer: the McCainSpace website didn't even go live until August.

Now that the race is won, will Obama's love of technology join the lawn signs and banner ads in the recycling bin? Hopefully not. President Elect Obama has vowed to appoint America's first cabinet-level Chief Technology Officer, tasked with reforming government IT infrastructure, improving transparency and rolling out broadband to every community in America. He's also a firm believer in net neutrality, green energy and blue-sky scientific research.

It seems that this tectonic shift in the technology of politics could be another change that you can believe in.

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