



# It's Not the Campaign Any More

How the White House is using Web 2.0 technology so far

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The Obama campaign broke new ground in its use of new media and social networking technologies such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to spread information and engage supporters. It also sparked imagination about how these Web 2.0 technologies could usher in a new era of government transparency and citizen participation.

Some observers, however, have been disappointed with the Obama administration's apparent caution in deploying a wide range of these same technologies on WhiteHouse.gov. In an April poll by [Nationaljournal.com](http://Nationaljournal.com), "new media experts from across the political spectrum gave WhiteHouse.gov an average grade of C+. Although they mostly saw the site as an improvement from the previous administration's, many noted that it remained a one-way forum."

There are major differences, however, between running a campaign and running the federal government. This introductory essay gives the big picture of the Obama administration's challenges in deploying Web 2.0 technologies, especially concerning citizen participation. Two accompanying papers examine barriers to federal adoption of Web 2.0 tools and how the federal government should go about procuring these services. The first, "Six New Media Challenges: Legal and Policy Considerations for Federal Use of Web 2.0 Technology," outlines the unique challenges facing Web 2.0 implementation on federal websites, including privacy issues, disability accessibility, commercial endorsements, and terms of service agreements. The second paper, "How to Buy Free Software: Procuring Web 2.0 Technology for the Federal Government," looks at novel issues of how the government should select and procure these free tools.

Taken together, these three documents explain the concrete issues that drive the federal government's consideration of exciting new technologies for transparency and citizen participation. Better knowledge about these key issues can also further the public debate and spur innovation among the many technologists and other citizens who want to enable better government information technology and bring about a new era of public participation.

I write about these issues as a private citizen—now a professor of law at the Ohio State University and a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. But during the Obama-Biden transition I acted as an attorney for the New Media team that operated the transition website [change.gov](http://change.gov) and developing [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov). The views in these papers are entirely my own, but they were developed in the course of solving concrete problems during the transition.

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## It's not the campaign anymore

The Obama campaign received early enthusiastic praise for its approach to Web 2.0 technology. After the election, the question arose of what could stay the same and what needed to change in the shift from campaigning to governing. There are three key differences pre- and post-election: scale, the clearance process, and the limits on how the government can authorize actions.

The scale point is easy to understand. The campaign learned how to cope with a motivated group of just over 10 million individuals. After Election Day, the transition and later the administration had to respond to the concerns of over 300 million Americans, as well as interested persons in other countries. Even more challenging, the massive number of volunteer workers and large group of paid campaign staff slimmed down to a relative handful of people running [change.gov](http://change.gov) and later [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov). In short, individualized answers to comments became very hard to manage. The challenge became how to solicit input and provide meaningful feedback to participants while recognizing that each comment could not get a thoughtful, individualized reply.

The importance of “clearance” is less familiar to those outside of the government. It refers to the need to get an accurate, useful response that has been “cleared” with all of the relevant agencies. An issue expert during the campaign would typically respond quickly if the campaign had a question. The campaign could ask a North Korea expert: “What should we say about the new problem today in North Korea?” and that expert would make it a priority to get a response back immediately. Yet once the new administration began, that North Korea expert might be somewhat busy, say, actually handling the new crisis.

Now suppose a White House blogger—or someone else answering comments on [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov)—can't get a hold of the North Korea expert and simply goes with his or her best judgment about what to say. During the campaign, that could backfire if the other candidate gets a good talking point. But in government, the consequences can be much more serious: What if North Korea didn't like the White House comment and decided to launch a missile attack on a neighboring country? That could obviously have more important, negative consequences. The point is that each answer from the White House requires a level of clearance, and accompanying time and hard work, which is far greater than for other organizations.

A third difference from the campaign is that the White House is very careful not to endorse or authorize others to act on its behalf. It is fine, during the campaign, to offer software that lets five teenagers sign up to drive together to canvas in a particular neighborhood. It can be a potential problem, however, if the official White House website sends the five teenagers off to do something. Are they acting on behalf of the White House? What if they say something or do something wrong, including saying that they are on White House business and then act in an illegal or unseemly way? But if the White House picks and chooses which people are eligible to sign up on the site for activities, then there can be charges of favoritism or politicization. In short, an official government site faces greater risks than ordinary private websites when enabling actions.

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## Participation and government 2.0 thus far

The challenges of scale, clearance, and avoiding endorsements in early deployment of Web 2.0 technology were accompanied by a number of challenging issues, explained in detail in the accompanying paper on “Six New Media Challenges: Legal and Policy Considerations for Federal Use of Web 2.0 Technology.” Those issues include privacy, security, access for the disabled, commercial endorsement and advertising, and terms of use. These constraints help explain why the administration has chosen its early uses of Web 2.0 the way that it has for video, public voting systems, episodes of intensive review of comments, and sample comments.

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## Video

The Obama campaign and administration have used video far more extensively than previous presidencies. Perhaps most visibly, the weekly radio address by previous presidents has transformed into a weekly video address, at first on YouTube and now available through a variety of video formats. There are many reasons for this increased reliance on video, including the skills of the New Media team, the enormous growth in video over the Internet generally in recent years, and President Obama’s effectiveness on video.

Video also gives a sense of immediacy and connection for viewers, while being manageable in terms of scale, clearance, and endorsement. Scale is not a big obstacle—it is essentially as easy to make video available on [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) as it was on the campaign web site. Although one difference is that there are government rules about access for disabled viewers, which require [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) to have closed captioning on its videos. Clearance is manageable because a video contains only a few minutes of content at a time. And video that comes from the White House itself does not raise problems of unknown members of the public acting on behalf of the government.

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## Public voting systems

Both the transition and the new administration have used voting systems to select a few “top rated” questions that are answered by officials. The “[Citizen’s Briefing Book](#)” during the transition received tens of thousands of ideas for government action. More than 70,000 people participated in the voting system, where readers could rate the quality of other submissions, with a total of 500,000 votes. President Obama used a similar “[Open For Questions](#)” approach for a White House town hall in late March. The White House reported that, “92,937 people have submitted 103,978 questions and cast 1,782,650 votes.” The Town Hall lasted a bit over an hour, with President Obama answering about a dozen questions that generally reflected major issues such as health care, education, and veterans’ benefits. He also answered a highly rated question about whether legalizing marijuana would improve the economy. His answer, according to the transcript: “The answer is, no, I don’t think that is a good strategy—(laughter)—to grow our economy. (Applause.)”

The Citizen’s Briefing Book and Open for Questions systems show the dramatic influence of scale and clearance on what technologies the White House selects to use. The problem of scale is easy to see: how could change.gov have responded meaningfully to over 70,000 people and whitehouse.gov to over 92,000? As the *National Journal* has [reported](#), the White House New Media team has fewer than 10 full-time employees, down from approximately 170 in the campaign by the time of the election.

Even if there were enough staff to read each question, the problem of clearance is far more serious. There is simply no way that the New Media team can (or would want to) answer the 103,000 questions posed for the March Town Hall alone. Answering even one question can take a great deal of careful attention when speaking for the federal government and it would often involve multiple agencies. Whenever an executive branch official testifies before Congress, the testimony is submitted in advance to the Office of Management and Budget, and White House officials and people in other agencies spend considerable time commenting on the draft testimony and negotiating about what the administration position will be.

The crucial importance of the clearance process shows why the citizen voting approach in Open for Questions is attractive to those who run whitehouse.gov. Many thousands of citizens can participate substantially—submitting their own questions and voting on questions submitted by others. But the Town Hall resulted in the president answering only about a dozen questions, and whitehouse.gov could select a small number of additional questions afterward for public answer.

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## Episodes of intensive review

Another way to encourage and respond to citizen participation is by having episodes of intensive review of public comments. One clear example came in December when

Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD), then leading the health care team, asked for Health Care Community Discussions to take place nationwide. Sen. Daschle attended one discussion in Indiana. Change.gov asked for a report, however, from every discussion group, and stated that the health care team “is going through each and every report we get back.” Change.gov said that these reports would be used “to prepare a report to the President-elect.”

This sort of occasional, intensive use of citizen participation addresses the problems of scale and clearance. The scale can remain daunting—we all sympathize with any reader whose homework is to read and digest thousands of comments. But it is a powerful message to send to citizens that an executive branch staff member will read “each and every report”. And this sort of intensive work exercise can be a good use of resources for intermittent, important occasions. This intensive review also avoids clearance problems—the promise was to *read* each submission, but not to answer them individually.

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## Sample comments

Another way to cope with the overwhelming scale of public comments is by choosing a sample. President Obama has received a purple folder each night since his first week in office with 10 letters, faxes, or emails from the general public. The White House Office of Correspondence selects the 10 public comments that are “broadly representative of the day’s news and issues; ones that are broadly representative of [the] President’s intake of current mail, phone calls to the comment line, and faxes from citizens; and messages that are particularly compelling.”

According to Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, President Obama requested the letters “to help get him outside of the bubble, to get more than just the information you get as an elected official.” Having the president read only 10 letters obviously helps enormously in coping with the problem of scale, and the president himself can decide what to “clear” as he personally responds to two or three of them per day. The hard work of handling the huge flow of incoming messages falls to the Office of Correspondence, which has long faced the challenge of reading and responding to letters to the president. Looking into the future, we can see that the New Media team’s job of “answering Web comments” may overlap considerably with the Office of Correspondence’s “answering letters” job.

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## Conclusion

The ideal model for citizen participation would utilize Web 2.0 technologies to enable valuable citizen input that can make a difference in government policy and actions while also fostering a sense of participation, so that those outside of the government feel that they are a meaningful part of the process.

The trick is how to accomplish these goals given the White House' real world constraints. The Web 2.0 approaches used to date have addressed the problem of scale, when the sheer number of participants can overwhelm the handful of employees on the New Media team. They have recognized the burdens of "clearing" answers across the federal government, with the result that only a small subset of questions and comments receive an official answer. And they have avoided any features where a binding decision is made on behalf of those participating—the public does not get to decide outcomes or anoint anyone to speak on behalf of the government.

These constraints could be a source of frustration, leading to the conclusion that the White House cannot effectively promote citizen participation. A better outlook, I suggest, is to see this as an historic opportunity for software developers and participation theorists alike—now that we know the constraints—to figure out how can we build the best, most participatory White House 2.0 over the coming years.