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**POLITICS IN THE YOUTUBE AGE:
TRANSFORMING THE POLITICAL AND MEDIA
CULTURE?**

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POLITICS IN THE YOUTUBE AGE: TRANSFORMING THE POLITICAL CULTURE?

INTRODUCTION:

"Let's be clear about the challenges we are facing in British politics at the moment... the biggest task we have is to restore the public's support and trust in our political system as a whole..... And we cannot do this just in Westminster. It must be a process that engages citizens themselves."

Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of Britain, Press Conference, No 10 Downing Street, 19th May 2009

In May 2009 British politics was convulsed by a crisis of historic proportions. For the first time in more than three centuries, the Speaker of the House of Commons was forced from office. In the space of three weeks more than a dozen MPs from all political parties either resigned or were barred from contesting the next election. And public distrust in politicians rocketed to such a level that opinion polls suggested that half the parliament would be voted out at the next election.

This turmoil inside what is often affectionately called the 'mother of parliamentary democracies' was unleashed by revelations in the national newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, that members of parliament were abusing their allowances system. At a time when the country was being hit by the worst global economic downturn in almost a century, MP's claims for non-existent mortgages, for moat cleaning and for duck houses grabbed the headlines and fuelled disgust, distrust and fury with the political establishment.

The leaders of all of Britain's major political parties responded by calling for fundamental change. At a Downing Street press conference on the day the speaker stood down, the Prime Minister promised reform that would "change centuries of history for Parliament."¹ Britain's Conservatives leader warned that the "people now see the state as the enemy."² The leader of the Liberal Democrat Party described it as a moment that "must be seized by all those who want a different kind of politics in Britain."³ And the Archbishop of Canterbury added his voice, saying the crisis is "as grave as could be for our parliamentary democracy and urgent action is needed to restore trust."⁴

Less than six months earlier, history had been made in another democracy, with the inauguration of the United States' first black president, who also promised to change the way politics was conducted in his country. Barack Obama's campaign, with its emphasis on new media and a new style of politics and on directly engaging the public, was already being observed closely by political strategists in Britain.

¹ Gordon Brown, Prime Minister of Britain, Press Conference, No 10 Downing Street, 19th May 2009

² He also said that "the central objective of the new politics we need should be a massive, radical redistribution of power." David Cameron, Leader UK Conservatives Party, opinion piece, *The Guardian*, 26 May 2009

³ Nick Clegg, Leader Liberal Democrats, opinion piece, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2009

⁴ Rowan Williams, The Archbishop of Canterbury, opinion piece, *The Times*, 23 May 2009

But would the re-examination of British democracy prompted by the expenses scandal see British politicians now looking to the Obama campaign not only as a guide to electoral success but as a model for re-engaging citizens and re-invigorating Britain's political culture? Web 2.0 enthusiasts claim Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign, with its strong internet focus, as a triumph not only for the candidate but for a new, more democratic style of politics. So would Britain have its own Obama revolution?

This paper takes a detailed look at the Obama e-campaign, using it as a case study to assess the potential benefits and risks for political campaigns of web 2.0 campaigning. It analyses the notion that this technology can re-invigorate democracy. And it examines the extent to which US e-campaigning methods may be applied in the UK.

There are a number of over-arching themes I would like to touch on through this project. The major one is the extent to which the traditional gatekeepers of information - both political and journalistic - are losing their power. Are online technologies taking politics to the people and producing cyberspace versions of political town hall meetings? Does the rise in the political use of social networking and associated web 2.0 sites really pose a threat to the existing - some would say far too cosy - relationship between politicians and the mainstream media in countries like the US, the UK and Australia? And what are the potential implications of all of this for trust in politicians, the media and in democracy?

Chapter one will set out some of the definitions and theory on web 2.0 in a political campaigning environment.

Chapter two will detail the key features of the Obama e-campaign and the extent to which they challenged the role of campaign gatekeepers and amounted to a new more democratic style of political campaigning.

Chapter three will ask whether an Obama style e-campaign may soon be run in the United Kingdom and at the institutional and cultural barriers that may inhibit this, looking in particular at the UK Labour party.

Because the use of Web 2.0 in the political sphere is so new and, indeed, the British political crisis is ongoing, the academic literature on this subject is limited. There has been considerable analysis of the nature of Web 2.0 technologies.⁵ There has also been research on the potential of earlier web applications to galvanise public participation in politics.⁶ And there have been studies on the rise of citizen journalism and the challenge it poses to mainstream media models.⁷ But there has been little

⁵ See Boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B., "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007

David Osimo, "Web 2.0 in Government: Why and How?" Joint Research Centre Scientific and Technical Reports, European Commission, 2008

Paul Anderson, "What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for Education", *JISC Technology and Standards Watch*, Feb. 2007

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C., The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007

⁶ Stephen Coleman, *How the Other Half Votes: Big Brother Voters and the 2005 General Election*, Hansard Society, 2006

Stephen Coleman and Stephen Ward (eds), *Spinning the Web: online campaigning in the 2005 General Election*, Hansard Society, 2005

⁷ William H Dutton, "The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks", *Prometheus*, March 2009

specific analysis of the use of web 2.0 applications like online social networking sites in political campaigning or on the impact of these developments on political journalists and how they work.

This project undertakes an analysis of the existing literature and supplements this with media articles as well as interviews with key political strategists and journalists. It is intended to provide insights and questions for future research rather than definitive findings.

CHAPTER ONE: The Political Promise of Web 2.0

Cynicism and the TV -Age Political Campaign:

In the UK, as in other western democracies, concerns had been raised well before the expenses scandal or the Obama election about public cynicism toward politicians and about a decline in public engagement in politics. For more than a decade, politics watchers and practitioners alike have been sounding warnings about the way modern political campaigns have distanced citizens from the democratic process. In Britain, voter turnout declined from 84 per cent at the 1950 election to 59 per cent in 2001.⁸ In the United States it fell from 63 percent in 1960 to 49 percent by 1996.⁹

Dennis Kavanagh points out that in modern western democracies, election campaigns are “the only regular institutionalised opportunities which are available for citizens to decide who governs them,” and are intended to have a “citizenship-enhancing role.”¹⁰ Journalists are meant to facilitate this by reporting on policies and political activity. And yet over the last couple of decades, the mass media has become not so much a conduit as the target audience for political information. Politicians have ‘learned’ the TV age requirements for maximizing their coverage and managing their image and have intensified their focus on the mass media - and on television in particular - as the key vehicle for communicating with voters.¹¹ As part of this process, they have relied more and more on pollsters, data managers and spin doctors.

This mass media obsessed campaigning style might have won elections but it also devalued the individual citizen’s role in the process and led to public disillusionment with both politicians and political journalists.

By the late 1990s Jay Blumler was diagnosing a crisis in this arena, saying “the political communication process now strains against rather than with the grain of citizenship.” He warned

⁸ Geoffrey Weatcroft, “Cash but no Questions.”, *The Guardian*, 23rd May, 09

⁹ Turnout figures vary according to source but range between 49 and 55 per cent. In August 1998, The US Census Bureau put out a new report: “Data are from the November 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. The CPS routinely overestimates voter turnout. As discussed in detail in the report, the Current Population Survey’s overall turnout rate of 54.2 percent is higher than the “official” turnout rate of 49.8 percent, as reported by the Clerk of the House.”

¹⁰ Dennis Kavanagh, *Election Campaigning: the new Marketing of Politics*, 1995, Blackwell, p1,p226

¹¹ The UK Conservative Party stated baldly, in its 1992 campaign ‘war book’, that ‘the most important target group is the media’ Dennis Kavanagh, *Election Campaigning: the new Marketing of Politics*, 1995, Blackwell, p3

about the development of “a ‘public sphere commandeered by insiders’ where voters’ needs to make sense of civic problems get pushed to the margins.”¹²

But if the last few decades has seen this citizens’ ‘public sphere’ -- commandeered by political professionals and the mass media, is this space now being opened up again as the internet comes of age politically?

The Political Future according to the Web 2.0 Optimist:

That is certainly the way many media analysts and Web 2.0 players see it.

In his “The Wealth of Networks”, Yochai Benkler documents the failures of the mainstream media players as “platforms for public discourse. First they provide a relatively limited intake basin ... Secondly, particularly when the market is concentrated, they give their owners inordinate power to shape opinion and information.” By contrast he forecasts that the internet will see “the emergence of a substantial alternative platform for the public sphere... that will have no obvious points of control or exertion of influence.”¹³

The News and Political Director of the world’s biggest video sharing website, YouTube, makes big claims for his company’s capacity to be that new, more democratic ‘public sphere’. Steve Grove declares that YouTube “is now the world’s largest town hall for political discussion” and that, because it is not reliant on the mainstream media, “average citizens are able to fuel a new meritocracy for political coverage, one unburdened by the gatekeeping ‘middleman.’”¹⁴

Despite writing for what Grove would no doubt have defined as one of these gatekeeping ‘middlemen’, the Washington Post’s internet reporter Jose Antonio Vargas, is also enthusiastic about web 2.0’s promise of unshackling the public from the power of ‘elites’. He says that “in the past, we’ve thought of politics as something *over there* -- isolated, separate from our daily lives, as if on a stage upon which journalists, consultants, pollsters and candidates spun and dictated and acted out the process. Now....politics is *right here*....More than any other medium in our history, the Web is by the people, for the people.”¹⁵

¹² Jay G. Blumler, “Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship,” *Political Communications*, 1997,p395-400 Note he is referencing the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas’, concept of the ‘public sphere’

¹³ Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale University Press, 2006, p10-11 , p177

¹⁴ Steve Grove, News and Political Director YouTube “YouTube: The Flattening of Politics” Niemen Reports, Niemen Foundation for Journalism, Harvard University

¹⁵ Jose Antonio Vargas, Politics Is No Longer Local. It’s Viral”, *Washington Post*, 28 December, 2008

And in his study of Facebook, Mike Westler writes that the popular social networking site “is well suited to communication intended to organise and rally members to action around a common goal,” and that Facebook has “the potential to expand Jurgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere by allowing the public to engage in political action both in conjunction with and independently of campaigns.”¹⁶

The British expenses scandal certainly sparked just such activity among disgruntled citizens. Within a week of the first *Telegraph* story on expenses, Ian Fairbairn, a real estate agent and former Labour voter, had set up www.dishonourable.org.uk, inviting visitors to nominate their pick of the “most shameless” MPs and he claimed the site was receiving 100 hits an hour.¹⁷ One MP who resigned because of the scandal, Julie McBride, was put under pressure by a 4000-signature online petition calling for her to step down and by 1265 people who joined the Facebook group, Julie Must Go.¹⁸ The non-aligned political action site, 38 degrees, launched an online petition calling for a law that would allow constituents to remove their political representatives between elections.¹⁹ And when another aspect of MPs’ expenses was raised back in January 2009, 7000 people joined a Facebook group to prevent politicians from voting to conceal their expenses. That group was launched by Tom Steinberg on his mysociety site and he claimed the decision to cancel the vote as: “a huge victory not just for transparency, it’s a bellwether for a change in the way politics works.”²⁰

In the United States, many say this change has already taken place. Ben Self, one of Barack Obama’s key digital advisors, portrays the Democrat candidate’s 2008 Presidential campaign as the first to fulfil the democratic promise of web 2.0. He says that “new media is bringing a new level of honesty to democracy,” and that, in contrast to the television age, “candidates and political parties are now interacting directly with their supporters and members rather than having this content filtered through the media or donors.”²¹

But in his book *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Matthew Hindman argues that the notion that the web has no gatekeepers is true only in terms of what can be uploaded onto the internet. While anyone with access to a computer or phone can publish information, Hindman argues that there are powerful gatekeepers - including search engine operators - determining which information actually gets heard on the web. Hindman’s book went to print before Obama won the Democrat Party’s nomination but one of the less open aspects of the internet’s operation that featured during the

¹⁶ Mike Westling, “Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication” UW – Madison, May 2007 (unpublished), p2

¹⁷ Gaby Himself, Caroline Davies and Toby Helm, “The week Britain turned its anger on politicians” *The Observer*, 17 May 2009

¹⁸ www.facebook.com/juliemustgo

¹⁹ <http://38degrees.org.uk/page/s/recall>

²⁰ Tom Steinberg, www.mysociety.org, January 21st, 2009. He also said in same post: “Make no mistake. This is new, and it reflects the fact that the Internet generation expects information to be made available, and they expect to be able to make up their own minds, not be spoon fed the views of others.”

²¹ Blue State Digital co-founder, Ben Self, speaking at an Australian Labour Party event to Michael Morgan, Director of the Australian Labour Party’s International Unit, 20 February 2009

Obama campaign and that Hindman may have seen fit to criticise, was the use of the 'google bomb'. Google bombs involve individuals or, more often, groups of people manipulating the search engine by loading up a search term so that a search for information about a particular politician will bring up predominantly negative results. For example Obama was the victim of google bombs associating him with Islamic terrorism. Hindman does not dispute that the internet has the potential to revive democracy – both by providing citizens with the technological means for them to take a greater watchdog role over their elected representatives and by facilitating political discussion and engagement in the political process. But he is sceptical about just how much power the web gives to the ordinary citizen rather than existing elites and how much of what appears to be democracy in action is instead people in power manipulating the anonymity of this new technology in their own interests.

But if Hindman is sceptical, Andrew Keen is positively scathing about the promise of web 2.0. He argues that if the web 2.0 optimists had their way the result would not be a democratic utopia but a tyranny of pure democracy which would kill off civilization. He says replacing gatekeepers with the "din of narcissism" would mean "undermining truth, souring civic discourse and belittling expertise, experience and talent."²² Keen argues that gatekeepers are essential to "filter truth from fiction, genuine content from advertising, legitimate information from error or outright deceit."²³ And he says regulation or some form of reliable gatekeeper function will be needed because he doubts whether we can "really trust society to behave properly in the wild west world of the Web 2.0 revolution."²⁴

So what exactly is web 2.0 and what makes it different from the sort of internet interaction that was available in the past?

What is Web 2.0?

The term Web 2.0 was first used in 2004 to describe the technological innovations which led to a more collaborative approach to the internet, "in which people can contribute as much as they can consume."²⁵ While there is some dispute over whether this more interactive web is sufficiently different from what preceded it to deserve to be called a new generation of the technology, there is little doubt that the last five years have seen an explosion in user-driven production, sharing and tagging of information of all forms -- from photos on flickr to videos on YouTube to words and images on wikis - and that there has been a shift from top down and simple two way interaction to lateral communication.

²² Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: how today's internet is killing our culture and assaulting our economy*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2007, p15

²³ *Ibid.*, p65

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p197

²⁵ Paul Anderson, "What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for Education", JISC Technology and Standards Watch, Feb. 2007

Social networking sites – like Bebo, LinkedIn, Myspace and Facebook - are at the heart of this shift. Here members can send emails to other members of their network, write public messages on each other's walls, share photos, advertise events, alert others to videos on YouTube and rate news stories. The most successful of these sites perform not just one but several of these functions -- for example Facebook is now the most popular site for photo sharing in the US, overtaking the dedicated photo sharing site, Flickr²⁶. One analysis of online social networking suggests that its popularity "indicates a shift in the organization of online communities"²⁷ from being focused primarily around interests to being organized around people.

For the purposes of political communication it is the change in the way information flows in these online communities that is critical. That shift is from the two way style of corporate and political websites and blogs associated with the first generation of the web – top down with comments sent back up - to a more lateral communication style, where information is shared across a network of connected people and the conversation is a multi-part social interaction. This change in the nature of information flow opens up the opportunity for exponential – or viral – growth in a politician's support base or in the size of an audience for a political video or news story.

And it presents both opportunities and dangers to political campaigners.

Web 2.0 Politics in Action:

Web 2.0 enabled social networking sites are changing both the way that politicians engage in political campaigns and the way that citizens engage in politics. Web 2.0 sites like YouTube, Facebook, and the micro-blogging and social networking site, Twitter, have seen phenomenal rates of growth over the last four years. YouTube launched in December 2005. Within a year it had been bought by Google for 1.65 billion dollars. And by the end of 2008 it had almost 100 million users in the United States alone.²⁸ Twitter was launched in July 2006 and in March 2008 it had one million users. The site analysis company, Compete, estimates that just a year later, it had more than 20 million users.²⁹ And Facebook, which began in 2004 as an exclusively university student network, opened to all in 2006 and was soon signing up more than 1 million users a week. It is now the 6th most trafficked site in the United States.³⁰

This explosion in online social networking has already transformed the way election campaigning is conducted in the United States. As was the case with television half a century ago, YouTube is now a 'must master' platform for politicians, whether they want to embrace this new technology or not. YouTube didn't exist at the time of the last Presidential election. Four years later, seven of the 2008 contenders announced their candidacy on the video sharing website. And candidates in the 2008

²⁶cited on Crunch base, which describes itself as a free tech company database <http://www.crunchbase.com/company>

²⁷ Boyd, D.M., & Ellison, N. B., "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007

²⁸ Dan Former, "YouTube Hits 100 Million U.S. Viewers, Hulu Surges ", *The Silicon Valley Insider* (www.businessinsider.com) , December 9, 2008

²⁹ Compete, <http://siteanalytics.compete.com>, cited on Crunch base, <http://www.crunchbase.com/company>

³⁰ Ibid.

campaign were also using sites like Twitter, Myspace and Facebook to communicate with potential voters and to build fast growing support bases.

The last US Presidential election cycle also saw a significant shift in the way that citizens involved themselves in the political process. In 2004, only 13 per cent of Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Centre said they were regularly learning about the election campaign from the internet.³¹ But in 2008 a majority of the US population and 74% of internet users went online to get involved in politics or to find out election news. Of these, almost half watched a video online and one third became more actively involved and forwarded political information to others. As for young online Americans - those aged between 18 and 24 – they conducted the vast majority of their political debate through social networking sites, with two thirds of them using their online networks to take part in some form of political activity.³²

These changes have thrown into question just how much control is still wielded by the traditional US campaign power brokers: the mainstream media, the political parties and individual campaign directors.

The grip of US political parties over the election process has varied in strength over the decades but party delegates have long controlled critical votes and policed access to the party's usually considerable campaigning resources, including money and voter data. The top strategists in each candidate's campaigns have also had a strong gatekeeper role and tended to keep tight control over information relating to the campaign strategy as well as over databases on voter preferences and behaviours. But the 2008 Presidential race showed that political candidates could use online communities to great effect to raise money and support. And political control of information is now a much tougher challenge.

For the political journalists and media organisations which have traditionally controlled the flow of information to the public during an election campaign, Web 2.0 has dealt a dual challenge. YouTube, which allows anyone to upload or watch a video for free, has diluted the power of mainstream media players to control when and how politicians are presented to a mass audience. And, as Robert Picard rather brutally pointed out to a group of journalists at the Reuters Institute in Oxford recently, journalists are also being de-skilled by the web: "to create economic value, journalists and news organizations historically relied on the exclusivity of their access to information and sources, and their ability to provide immediacy in conveying information."³³ Now, mobile web applications give politicians and members of the public the ability to publish words, audio and video online quickly and cheaply. And while this means politicians can be under constant surveillance from an army of technology savvy 'little brothers' wielding mobile phones, the ability to post directly to YouTube enables politicians to avoid that old media bargain of agreeing to a potentially tough interview with a political journalist as the price of being broadcast.

³¹ Scott Keeter, Juliana Horowitz, Alec Tyson,, "Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008: Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off", *The Pew Research Centre for People and the Press, Survey Report*, January 11, 2008,

³² Aaron Smith, "Internet's Role in Campaign 2008", *The Pew Research Centre for People and the Press*, 15 April 2009

³³ Robert G. Picard, Professor of media economics Jonkoping University, Sweden, and visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, Reuters Institute Seminar: " Why Journalists Deserve Low Pay", Green Templeton College, Oxford, 6 May 2009

For many political pundits the triumph of Barack Obama in the 2008 Presidential race is - or should be - sounding the death knell for traditional, top down, 'command and control' styles of political campaigning and for the political and media culture that goes with that.

But has there been a rush to judgement on just what Barack Obama's election victory means for the running of a successful political campaign in the YouTube age? Certainly the Obama campaign gave a degree of autonomy to his campaign volunteers and relied heavily on the viral nature of the web to spread support. But, as we'll see in the next chapter, while Barack Obama did not run a traditional war room-style campaign, it was not just a chat room either.

CHAPTER TWO: Political Campaigning in the YouTube age - the Obama Example

The Obama victory confirmed in spectacular style the power of Web 2.0 technologies in US political campaigning. Barack Obama went from being a little known senator who couldn't even get an official pass onto the Democrat convention floor two Presidential elections ago, to becoming the first black President of the United States and the biggest campaign fund raiser in US history, knocking out the once seemingly invincible Clinton machine in the process. And he credits his network of online supporters with playing a major role in that journey.

But while Barack Obama was using new technology to embrace a new generation of political activists and supporters, he didn't lose sight of old style campaigning in the process.

When, shortly before the Democrat National Convention in August 2008, Barack Obama asked his supporters to text him so that he could tell them first who he'd picked to be his Vice Presidential running mate, he wasn't only being the sort of inclusive candidate that his by then millions strong army of tech-savvy supporters had come to expect. He was also playing a shrewd 'old style' political game. He was using the opportunity to collect the contact details of potential voters to add to his campaign database.³⁴

On that hot August evening, 84,000 supporters crammed into the 76,000 seat stadium in Denver to hear their candidate speak. And as they did, those who had signed up to be told about Obama's running mate received a text message from the Obama campaign. It asked them to text back with their name and town if they wanted to help the campaign; to text their friends and family to make sure they would be watching the candidate's prime time address; to text which of a range of policies were most important to them; and to make phone calls to unregistered voters as they waited, some for 7 hours, for Barack Obama to accept the Democrat Party's nomination.³⁵ When he did stride onto the stage – controversially not at the convention centre but at a huge open air venue more suited to a rock star than a politician – he told them: “This election has never been about me - it is about you!”³⁶

It would be easy to dismiss this comment from one of the most charismatic figures ever to run for the White House, as mere rhetoric. But while of course the election was about him, it was also about an extraordinary shift in public engagement in politics. He wasn't the first Presidential candidate to make use of the internet and its networking potential to build a support base. But Barack Obama has been, far and away, the most successful.

His campaign is therefore an excellent vehicle through which to examine the ways in which online social networking and related web 2.0 technologies can be useful to a political campaign, while also

³⁴ Matthew McGregor writes that this tactic meant that “the campaign was able to secure the email or mobile details of more than a million people... not previously in the campaign's orbit.”, “The Democratising Force of fundraising,” Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p70

³⁵ “Obama uses speech for high-tech outreach” [We The People - Organizing for America](#), 31 August 2008

³⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZCrleRkMhA>

highlighting some of the potential risks. And it can also help to illuminate if and how the explosion in the public's use of online social networking is challenging those political and media authorities which have traditionally held power in a political campaigning environment.

The mechanics of the Obama e-Campaign:

Internet technologies had certainly developed since Democrat campaigner Howard Dean used meetup, email and blogging to explode into the lead in the 2004 primaries. But Obama succeeded where Dean quickly crashed and burned not only because he was a better candidate and because the social networking technology had developed further but because of the way his campaign team used that technology.

There is no denying that in 2008, the times suited the Democrat Presidential contender. A sizable chunk of the United States electorate was furious with Republican incumbent George W. Bush and ready for change. Barack Obama galvanised Americans with his inspirational speeches about hope and change, and the young, black, blackberry-using Democrat embodied his message about bringing in a new generation and a new kind of politics.³⁷ But, for all his personal political skills, many analysts have suggested that without the help of the internet, Obama may very well have failed to defeat the powerful Clinton machine in the Democrat primaries to become the nominee.³⁸

One of the significant early decisions Barack Obama made was to elevate his internet campaign manager to the most senior level within the campaign structure. Joe Rospars, the founder and creative director of Blue State Digital, was the Campaign's New Media Director and he "reported directly to the campaign manager and the candidate."³⁹ He says this was unusual not only compared to UK campaigns but for the United States as well and he said it was "essential" to the success of the e-campaign.

In the following section I examine how the Obama campaign used the web, and its social networking elements in particular, to supplant or supplement traditional campaign functions, such as building a voter database and organising volunteers.

1. The internet as database:

Depending on the political system, some elements of campaigning will be more or less important. But key to all successful political campaigns is the ability to connect with prospective voters. That makes a database of potential supporters and information on how to reach them and how to get them to vote, one of the most critical resources for any political campaign.

President George W. Bush's key advisor, Karl Rove, refined a data gathering system, that he called "metrics", that allowed a small group of top advisors to control a massive data base of information

³⁷ Six months into his Presidency, there was criticism in the mainstream media about a 'cult of personality' developing around Obama, See "Pm" BBC Radio 4, 24 June 2009.

³⁸ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "The Web 2.0 Election," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p48

Stephen Hill, New America Foundation, "The World Wide Webbed", *Social Science Journal*, 8 April, 2009

Joshua Green, "The Amazing Money Machine: How Silicon Valley made Barack Obama this year's hottest start-up" *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2008

³⁹ Joe Rospars, Founder and Creative Director, Blue State Digital; New Media Director for the Obama Campaign, Interview Washington DC, 3 June, 2009

about prospective voters, including details like their religious views. This system built on the information-amassing capabilities of the internet and led to the micro targeting of voters that many credit with winning the critical state of Ohio for the Republicans in 2004.⁴⁰

The Democrats were also using the internet to build data bases. But it wasn't until the 2008 campaign that the information gathering potential of social networking sites became obvious. Facebook groups supporting Barack Obama were forming long before he announced his candidacy. The Illinois Senator was popular with students for his anti-Iraq war stand and there were more than 500 Obama groups on Facebook in early 2007. A University of Missouri student began one, called "One Million Strong for Barack", on the day that Obama announced he was forming an exploratory committee to look into running for the Whitehouse. A month later it had 278,100 members.⁴¹

Joe Trippi was the e-campaign director for the most internet-savvy politician of the 2004 US Presidential race, Howard Dean, and he gave an indication of just how quickly this technology was moving. He told the *Washington Post* newspaper: "It took our campaign six months to get 139,000 people on an e-mail list. It took one Facebook group, what, barely a month to get 200,000? That's astronomical."⁴²

This groundswell of online support for Obama was a clear challenge to the power of those who would traditionally have had major sway in deciding on the Democrat Party's Presidential candidate. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama fought one of longest and tightest primary battles ever and the candidate who initially had the backing of the powerful party machine and the larger war-chest of funds, Hillary Clinton, did not prevail to become the official Democrat nominee.

While Obama's message was clearly critical in generating his online support, it was the lateral way that his message was spread on social networking sites, like Facebook, that drove the exponential nature of this growth. Jennifer Stromer-Galley describes "viral" as the "hot new word of this presidential campaign." She says the videos which went viral on YouTube worked because they were able to "speak to particular demographics in ways that the candidates and campaigns themselves sometimes cannot."⁴³ And she says the 2008 campaign strategists were placing increased importance on "word-of-mouth testimony among friends ... in contrast with the more mass-mediated focused campaigns of past years."⁴⁴

But while it can speed up the process of building a data base of supporters, the viral spread of political messages also carries risks for a campaign. Messages can be distorted. Slip-ups or quirks

⁴⁰ Ken Mehlman was the campaign manager for the Republicans in 2004, and he described 'metrics' as measuring the "success or failure of everything. We did it for raised dollars; we did it for voter registration; we did it for number of visits we wanted to make to different places around the country; we did it for polling. If you can't measure it, it's not worth doing." Interviewed for "Karl Rove: the Architect", *Frontline*, PBS, December 2004

⁴¹ Jose Antonio Vargo, "Young Voters Find Voice on Facebook", *Washington Post*, 17 February, 2007

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jennifer Stromer-Galley "The Web 2.0 Election," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p52 The YouTube videos she highlights are will I am, Obama Girl and the 'vote different' ad

⁴⁴ Ibid., p53-54; See also Joshua Green, "The Amazing Money Machine: How Silicon Valley made Barack Obama this year's hottest start-up" *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2008

"The purpose of social networking is to connect friends and share information, its animating idea being that people will do this more readily and comfortably when the information comes to them from a friend rather than from a newspaper or expert or similarly distant authority they don't know and trust." "The Amazing Money Machine: How Silicon Valley made Barack Obama this year's hottest start-up" *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2008

can be magnified, mocked and remixed for a YouTube audience.⁴⁵ And it is difficult to control or even predict what will go viral.⁴⁶ Just a few years ago encouraging such an anarchic situation was unthinkable for traditional political campaign strategists. When websites were first used in Presidential campaigns in 1996, the strategists decided not to take full advantage of wall features or message boards because of concerns "about the loss of control of the message that such increased interactivity with supporters and critics would entail."⁴⁷

And the 2008 campaign showed that there was a downside. Some of the viral hits of the 2008 campaign - like the Obama Girl videos, which were out of the control of the campaign but were important for Obama in generating name recognition early on - were later used against the Democrat candidate by his Republican opponent.⁴⁸ And the Obama social networking site, My.BarackObama.com, itself was used to launch a group opposing one of Obama's policies. Matthew McGregor from Blue State Digital's London office says: "30 thousand people joined this group in a week or something terrifying and the media were immediately writing stories - 'Obama's supporters turn on him.'"⁴⁹

But Obama strategists did not react by attempting to restrict access to the campaign site. They continued to use social networking avenues to build their database. On twitter and My.BarackObama.com they directed people to events, where the price of getting a ticket to hear Obama speak was to give your contact details. By polling day, the campaign had a database of more than thirteen and a half million email addresses.⁵⁰

Then there was the question of how to use that data. And here the Obama campaign did something revolutionary. Instead of keeping the data secret and only accessible to the privileged top campaign advisors, the team decided to open it up to supporters. This was a voluntary giving away of one of the most powerful roles of a political campaign gatekeeper – control over voter information. It was also the key to Obama's success in turning the internet into a volunteer organiser.

2. The internet as volunteer organiser:

Experienced campaign volunteers, Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts, say that "direct-contact politics has long been regarded as the poor relation to 'air-war' style media-based campaigning."⁵¹ But that wasn't the case with the Obama campaign which was "able to call as many voters in Ohio in a single night as the Republicans had planned to contact during the entire month."⁵² And Christiansen and Roberts note that this level of support was in place across the battleground states and throughout the election campaign.

⁴⁵ Howard Dean's scream (February 2004) on youtube continuous loop set to heavy metal music:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t-80QAqtSg. Gordon Brown's smile (May 2009) set to "I feel pretty" on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vor03-uUeuM>

⁴⁶ Obama's race speech surprised many who were convinced that the youtube audience had too limited an attention span to watch a 37 minute speech. Yet in March 2008 it was Youtube's most watched video (National Public Radio website 20 March 2008).

⁴⁷ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, *ibid.*, p49

⁴⁸ Jennifer Stromer-Galley, *ibid.*, p52

⁴⁹ Matthew McGregor, London Director, Blue State Digital, Interviewed London, 27 May 2009

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts, "'Respect, empower ad include': the new model army", Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p41 (They describe themselves as "survivors of both Labour and Democratic Party campaigns")

⁵² *Ibid.*, p41

So how did the Obama team amass such a large number of volunteers and why was its management of them so effective?

Joe Rospars, the campaign's New Media chief, says that there are two databases that a campaign needs: "one is a database of voters, so that you can contact them send them mail and knock on their doors, but the other is a database of supporters so you can understand the relationship they have with you. Are they making donations, are they signing up on your email list, are they hosting offline?"⁵³

Rospars had worked on the Dean campaign and says his company, Blue State Digital, set out to solve two problems he identified during the Dean experience. One was that when the Dean team referred supporters to the online site, MeetUp, to help in volunteering, it lost the ability to co-ordinate their activities. Not only did it not get access to the contact details of these volunteers, but the campaign's timetable became hostage to the timing of the monthly MeetUp meetings. The other major concern was that many of these potential campaign workers were spending their time online talking to each other rather than offline making sure that people voted for the candidate. As Rospars puts it: "We needed to run a digital strategy that was tightly related to the offline goals of registering voters, raising dollars and recruiting supporters."⁵⁴

The solution his company put forward was the campaigning and social networking site, My.BarackObama.com, which the online media analyst, Matthew Buckland described as: "paradigm shifting for politics online. It's no doubt the most sophisticated political party website ever created."⁵⁵ The site offered social networking features like finding friends, forming groups and advertising events and it had a link to Facebook, so you could easily invite facebook friends to the myBo site.⁵⁶ But it was focused on the campaign and on tailoring each volunteer's time and abilities to a useful campaign task, whether it was sending a link about an Obama policy, donating money, writing a blog or organising an Obama event.

And it enabled Obama's campaign team to keep control of field staff and volunteers and to organise them in an effective way. Rospars says that rather than the disparate field operation that was evident with Dean, "within 24 hours of Obama announcing, we had one thousand support groups but they were all on My.BarackObama.com."⁵⁷

Again this is members of the public using the social networking features of the web to exercise their political rights to form groups but, here, rather than doing so in opposition to political authority figures, they were doing it on an official campaign website. Obama campaign strategists – political gatekeepers in the traditional analysis - were directing this volunteer campaigning operation even if they were not in command of every detail. An alliance was being formed between the gatekeepers and the socially networked public, and it was an alliance carefully controlled by the Obama political leadership.

⁵³ Joe Rospars, Founder and Creative Director, Blue State Digital; New Media Director for the Obama Campaign, Interview Washington DC, 3 June, 2009

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Matthew Buckland, "MyBarackObama – Paradigm shifting social networking," *It's all Geek to Me*, matthewbuckland.com

⁵⁶ Chris Hughes, the co-founder of Facebook, left that company to work on the Obama campaign. Sarah Lai Stirland, "Obama's Secret Weapons: Internet, Databases and Psychology", *Wired.com* October 29, 2008

⁵⁷ Joe Rospars, *ibid.* 35,000 volunteer groups eventually were created, and 200,000 off-line events planned. Cited in: Stephen Hill, New America Foundation, "The World Wide Webbed", *Social Science Journal*, 8 April, 2009

But while there was a clear line of command on the MyBarackObama site, volunteers were given unprecedented access to data and an unusual degree of autonomy to use that data to phone people to canvas their views, ask for donations and to organise local events. Christiansen and Roberts, who were Obama campaigners themselves said: "The campaign allowed volunteers to access their own call lists... and vitally to enter their own response information. Campaigns have traditionally resisted such openness because they were fearful that it exposes the core of field operations- in particular, the metrics of response rates - to the opposition, and risks undermining the integrity of the data set."⁵⁸ And Anstead and Straw point out that many traditional campaign strategists would have argued against such an approach on the grounds that it would "allow interest groups to capture campaign and policy making functions."⁵⁹

Rospars says the Obama team did consider these problems and put in place various technological and process controls to stop the site from being sabotaged by Republicans or the data from being contaminated. But he says that Obama was "the new guy on the scene and not the frontrunner so he didn't have the option to be content with the old way of doing things. He didn't have the luxury of worrying about the risks."⁶⁰

3. The internet as opinion pollster:

As well as using web 2.0 to marshal its supporter and potential voter databases and to organise its volunteers, the Obama campaign also used it as a sounding board for policies and to gauge the electorate's mood. The blogs, wall posts and phone logs were a free source of information for the Obama campaign directors about which policies were working and where to correct misinformation.

Again, in asking for candid views from the online community, there was potential for division and dissent. But even with the online group mentioned earlier that formed in opposition to an Obama policy, once Barack Obama joined the lively online discussion and gave his reasons, the issue died down. Blue State Digital's London director says that if this sort of online revolt had happened in Britain, "the politicians would be saying 'how can we shut down the internet? Find that guy and bury him in a deep hole'. In the US the response was to say this is exactly what our campaign is about."⁶¹

The Obama team was forging a mutually beneficial relationship with the web 2.0 world and did not appear to be threatened by the often volatile style of political participation encouraged by online social networking.

And the web 2.0 community was particularly useful in speedily reporting any new smears against Obama which could then be addressed online by the campaign hierarchy. The impact of a viral smear campaign could be significantly reduced by an army of online supporters watching out for anti-Obama propaganda. And Obama's team dealt with these viral campaigns in a typically web 2.0 manner. The Obama misinformation unit responded to the 'Obama is a Muslim' rumour, for example, not by having Obama repeatedly broadcast a rebuttal to a general audience, which may have merely strengthened the association, but by buying an ad on google. The ad simply stated:

⁵⁸Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts, "'Respect, empower ad include': the new model army", Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds) , *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p45

⁵⁹ Nick Anstead and Will Straw, *ibid.*, p100

⁶⁰ Joe Rospars, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Matthew McGregor, London Director, Blue State Digital, Interviewed London, 27 May 2009

"Barack Obama is a Christian. Get the facts at his official site.' ... Termed a "narrowcast" ad, it targets only those who type in certain key words stipulated by the Obama campaign."⁶² Clearly the more money his campaign had the greater Obama's capacity to buy such advertisements.

4. The internet as fund raiser:

It was perhaps in using the internet as a fundraiser that the Obama campaign's efforts were most impressive. Money is critical in US campaigns, even more so than in the UK or Australia. Not only does it fund the necessary advertising and staff but it gives a clear indication, during the crowded primary season, of a contender's electoral credibility and helps to generate mainstream media coverage and further donations.

And on this score Obama impressed, largely because he followed the Howard Dean model. Howard Dean was the first political contender to demonstrate the power of the internet to raise political funds through small donations. Matthew Hindman writes that in 1996, President Bill Clinton raised \$10,000 on the net and that amounts of this size were typical until Howard Dean arrived on the scene in 2004. That primary season, Dean raised 52 million dollars. And of this, Hindman says, only 11 per cent came from donors giving the legally decreed US limit of \$2000.⁶³

Four years later, Barack Obama raised the largest campaign fund in US history and became the first candidate ever to refuse public funding. Yet despite the size of his campaign fund, it too came mainly from small donations. There is some dispute about just how much of the Obama campaign fund was raised from small donors, depending on the definition of a small donation and how a person who donates multiple times is counted.⁶⁴ Obama campaign's Director of New Media says that more than 500 million of the 657 million dollars that Barack Obama raised by polling day, came from online donations of under 200 dollars each.⁶⁵ The Federal Election Commission, which examines campaign financing, puts the Obama fund at 745 million by the end of the calendar year (as opposed to voting day) of which only 335 million was from donations of less than 200 dollars. But of this larger total the FEC still had 634 million dollars worth of donations coming from donors who were giving less than the federally decreed limit.⁶⁶

A fundraising strategy that relies more on many small donations than large donors has the potential to change the big money-power nexus in US politics. As Hindman puts it, the small donor strategy reduces the problem of undue political influence by large donors: "smaller donations send less precise messages to candidates."⁶⁷

5. The internet as Political Broadcaster:

⁶² Toby Harnden, "Barack Obama buys ad to combat smears" The Telegraph, 31 January 2008

⁶³ Hindman says the 2000 elections amounts that ranged up to 2.7 million for Al Gore were likely to have been distorted because the internet was used to launder money coming from fundraisers. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Princeton UP, New Jersey, 2009, p28-30 NOTE for the 2008 election the Federal limit had risen from \$2000 to \$2300

⁶⁴ Joshua Green, "The Amazing Money Machine: How Silicon Valley made Barack Obama this year's hottest start-up" The Atlantic Monthly, June 2008

Andrew Romano, "Four Myths of Obama's Money Machine," *Newsweek Blog*, 8 July 2008

⁶⁵ Joe Rospars, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Federal Electoral Commission, Online reporting on Presidential Campaign Finance, www.fec.gov/DisclosureSearch

⁶⁷ Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Princeton UP, New Jersey, 2009, P29 However it should be noted that in refusing Federal Funding, Obama avoided an automatic audit. While his campaign fund can still be audited by the FEC if it chooses, the automatic transparency is removed.

The new online social networking sites were clearly critical sources of support for Barack Obama and over the course of the campaign his team appealed directly to the users of such sites for money, campaigning support and information. The Obama leadership team also tried to influence citizens who were not necessarily on the Obama database through the video sharing site, YouTube.

During the course of the campaign, the Obama team uploaded more than 1800 videos onto Obama's YouTube channel.⁶⁸ In doing this, it was clearly bypassing mainstream media gatekeepers and attempting to directly shape the way a story was seen by a mass audience. Perhaps its most effective instance of this was Obama's speech responding to the racially divisive comments from his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. The comments had been dominating the mainstream media and when Obama responded in a speech to a group of supporters in Philadelphia on the 18th of March 2008 and there were short clips of his speech on the network news programs that night. But when the campaign put the 37 minute speech on YouTube, it became a political and media phenomenon. Within two days, this simple unadorned piece of video had become the most watched clip on YouTube, going viral as friends passed it on to each other. Its popularity defied depictions of the YouTube generation as citizens with short attention spans obsessed with trivial video mash-ups, and it put the division with Wright off the news agenda.⁶⁹

Mainstream political journalists were largely reporting this campaign in classic TV-age style, citing opinion polls, looking for division and conflict and travelling with the various political players reporting on the day's campaigning and trying to get exclusive interviews. But Barack Obama and other 2008 political contenders were no longer entirely reliant on the mainstream media to grant them access to a mass broadcast audience.

But just because it was now possible to communicate with a potentially large audience without going via those once powerful media gatekeepers did not mean that political players were prepared to ignore the mainstream media. In the closing days of the campaign, Barack Obama ran one of the most expensive television advertisements ever – a national half hour prime time advertisement that ran on 7 channels simultaneously.⁷⁰ YouTube posts by politicians were also often designed to attract the attention of the mainstream journalists and so gain access to a bigger audience.⁷¹

Often, though, it was non-official political videos rather than videos from political candidates which had the best reception on YouTube. The Obama Girl videos, which had more than 10 million hits by the end of the campaign (the race speech had just over 5 million) were not produced by the Obama campaign but by a comedian who was trying to generate publicity for his company.⁷² But you would not have known that from looking at YouTube, where videos can be posted anonymously. One of the features of web 2.0 sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, is that anyone can mask their

⁶⁸ Trippi argues that these videos were more effective than television advertising because "viewers chose to watch them or received them from a friend instead of having their television shows interrupted." Stephen Hill, New America Foundation, "The World Wide Webbed", *Social Science Journal*, 8 April, 2009

⁶⁹ "Obama's speech on Race tops YouTube", *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 20 March 2008

⁷⁰ Jim Rutenberg, "Obama Infomercial, a Closing Argument to the Everyman" *New York Times*, 29 October 2008

⁷¹ Bluestate Digital's Matthew McGregor says a lot of the John McCain advertisements on YouTube "were not about getting the maximum number of people to see it but about driving the news agenda for that day." Matthew McGregor, Director, Blue State Digital UK, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

⁷² Ben Relles' Web site, www.barelypolitical.com.

identity on the site. And that raises the question: how many such videos were truly independent of powerful political players? And what would prevent the Obama campaign producing its own Obama Girl videos next time around.

One of the other big political hits on YouTube was the "Vote Different" video, an attack ad on Hillary Clinton that was posted by "ParkRidge47". Several weeks after it first appeared, an employee of the digital strategy company used by Barack Obama, Blue State Digital, was exposed as its creator.⁷³ He was fired and both the company and the Obama Campaign issued statements clarifying that they had not been responsible for the ad. But the incident exposed the potential for political manipulation of content on YouTube.

It is interesting that while Obama's political strategists may have been using web 2.0 in part to get around the mainstream news agenda or the unwelcome questions of seasoned political journalists, it was a 'citizen journalist' who scored one of the biggest negative Obama scoops of the campaign, and this was partly because she did not observe traditional journalistic conventions. Addressing an audience of Californian supporters at a fundraiser, Obama mused about "bitter voters" in Pennsylvania turning to guns and religion. The comments were reported on the online news site, the Huffington Post, by one of its 'citizen journalists', Mayhill Fowler. The issue was then picked up by Obama's political opponents and ran in the mainstream media. Citizen journalism was lauded for promoting transparency and ensuring that a politician could not say one thing to one audience and something else to another.

But it wasn't long before Fowler herself became the story, as her ethics in reporting the event were called into question. Mainstream political journalists observe a code of professional conduct which would have seen them identify themselves at the event as journalists, report in a non-partisan manner and observe an 'off the record' restriction. Fowler did not observe any of these conventions and while some would suggest it was positive to see the cosy relationship between mainstream political reporters and politicians breached, she was soon accused of being an anti-Obama stooge.⁷⁴

Whether or not she was a political plant, the deceptive shielding of identity is now so common on the web that it has spawned its own term: a 'sock puppet'. Matthew Hindman, says this anonymous use of the web by powerful interests reveals it to be less democratic than it looks and he concludes that it does not "empower ordinary citizenry but allowed disgruntled elites to get around institutional constraints,"⁷⁵

So does the Obama e-campaign demonstrate the power of web 2.0 to challenge traditional power structures and reinvigorate democracy?

War room or chat room -- democracy re-invigorated?

⁷³ Phil de Vellis, "I made the Vote Different Ad", Huffington Post, 21 March 2007 "because I wanted to express my feelings about the Democratic primary, and because I wanted to show that an individual citizen can affect the process"; Carla Marinucci, "Obama supporter owns up to video: Web strategist says he did anti-Clinton ad away from work" San Francisco Chronicle, 22 March 2007

⁷⁴ DemocraticUnderground.com, "Mayhill Fowler Secretly Taped Obama Fundraiser Where "Bitter" Happened (She's A Plant)", 12 April 2008

⁷⁵ Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Princeton UP, New Jersey, 2009, p138

Barack Obama wants his campaign to be seen as a rebirth of participatory democracy where it is ordinary people who are in charge, not traditional elites and special interest groups. This is what he said about the campaign in an email he sent out, as President, in June 2009:

“Last year, millions of Americans came together for a great purpose. Folks like you assembled a grassroots movement that shocked the political establishment and changed the course of our nation. When Washington insiders counted us out, we put it all on the line and changed our democracy from the bottom up. ... The pundits told us it was impossible -- that the donations working people could afford and the hours volunteers could give would never loosen the vise grip of big money and powerful special interests. We proved them wrong.”⁷⁶

This is a compelling story. But it is not the full story. Obama’s campaign was not simply a matter of “bottom up” democracy. His victory also required leadership from political campaign strategists who formed an alliance with the web 2.0 community and directed their activities. It was not about web 2.0 getting rid of the political gatekeepers, it was about the networked community joining forces with them and in many key areas significantly strengthening their power.

The support that the young Senator received from people spontaneously forming facebook groups and uploading YouTube videos was particularly important early on in the primary season and helped him to defeat the Democrat power brokers’ initially preferred candidate, Hilary Clinton. But, having learned from the Howard Dean experience, the Obama strategists recognised that the Web 2.0 community needed to be centrally led and organised in order to achieve any serious political goals.

As the campaign’s New Media Director, Joe Rospars, put it: “bottom up doesn’t have to mean disorganised.” He describes the campaign ethos as: “organised decentralisation, that provided the leadership and opportunities for action that you want people to take and... the tools to do it, in a way that you can track.”⁷⁷ Dean campaign veteran, Joe Trippi, put it more bluntly as “command and control at the top while empowering the bottom to make a difference.”⁷⁸

Obama’s e-campaign did reinvigorate democracy at its most fundamental level – that of participation. While the overall voter turnout was not as high as some political pundits had predicted, at around 61 percent it was up by 1 percent on 2004⁷⁹ and was almost back to the highs of the 1960 and 1964 elections. And beyond the aggregate vote, the participation rate increases were significant. One respected election analysis body estimated that the youth vote was up by between 4 and 5 percent on the 2004 vote and by as much as 12 percent on the 2000 vote. It found that the African American and Latino vote increased as a proportion of the national vote by 2 and 1

⁷⁶ Email from President Barack Obama (info@barackobama.com) to supporters, “This is why” 16 June, 2009

⁷⁷ Joe Rospars, *ibid.*

⁷⁸ Ari Berman “The Dean Legacy” *The Nation* Feb 2008

⁷⁹ Dr Michael McDonald’s US Election Project Survey puts total voter turnout for the 2008 Presidential election at 61.7 percent, “United States Election Project”, George Mason University and Brookings Institution, April 2009. But the Census Bureau’s population survey suggests it may have declined by 0.2 percent since 2004: US Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey”, April 2009

percent respectively.⁸⁰ Obama's campaign also engaged millions of citizens in political campaigning for the first time; half of his volunteers were participating in their first ever political campaign.⁸¹

Existing political powers in Britain are already looking carefully at the Obama victory to see how they can adapt it to assist them. The next chapter examines the extent to which an Obama style campaign is possible in Britain and what it could mean for the political and media culture there.

⁸⁰ Cited in: "America Goes to the Polls: A Report on Voter Turnout in the 2008 Election", Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network, May 2009 (this report collates statistics from a range of sources including the US Election Project, U.S. Census, Electionline.org and Secretaries of States)

⁸¹ Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts, "'Respect, empower ad include': the new model army", Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p42

CHAPTER THREE – An Obama e-campaign in Britain?

When I arrived in the UK in April, it was not yet the expenses scandal that was dominating political news but the McBride email saga. The expenses scandal may yet prove to be the catalyst for an Obama-style political re-engagement of British citizens. But the McBride affair suggests that, initially at least, some powerful political players were taking a very different lesson about the political power of the internet from the victory across the Atlantic.

Damien McBride was a Downing Street advisor who was forced to resign when emails he'd written to a Labour colleague were leaked and showed that he was part of a plan to run false smears about Conservative politicians on a non-official Labour blog, to be called "Red Rag". The conservative-leaning blogger, Paul Staines - who is the ex-investment banker behind the Guido Fawkes blog - obtained the McBride emails and took them to the mainstream media. McBride resigned shortly afterwards. In exposing the McBride plan, Staines was critical not only of what it said about the Labour party's approach to e-campaigning but of the too-close relationship between politicians and political journalists which he says allowed this story to go unreported.

For Labour reformers trying to get the party to engage with the political possibilities of web 2.0, the McBride affair was greeted with dismay. Luke Bozier was hired by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair to modernise Labour's internet strategy and was behind the launch of the Downing Street YouTube channel in 2007. He says while Tony Blair was enthusiastic about Web 2.0, the bureaucrats in Labour party headquarters were less impressed and he said that the McBride affair indicates of some of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's closest associates that, "Clearly they don't get it at all." He says this sort of distraction "sets people like me back who are trying to get parties to embrace e-technology and young."⁸²

The London director of the company that ran Barack Obama's digital strategy said the McBride approach was an example of the 'quick fix' response to Obama's electoral success that he sees across the parties in the UK. "What I think the parties in Britain haven't quite got their heads around yet is that they're trying to use new technologies to do the things they've been doing over the last ten years, the kind of message discipline, command and control, triangulation approach to politics and I think that has to go out the door."⁸³

So are British political strategists looking to the Obama e-campaign as a blueprint for a more interactive style of politics or are they interested in using it to amplify the old political discourse, while trying to look modern?

We're all Web 2.0 Now:

⁸² Luke Bozier, former Blair e-campaign advisor, interviewed London, 11 May 2009

⁸³ Matthew McGregor, London Director, Blue State Digital, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

John Harris, "Memo to Labour: please think about how it looks" *The Guardian*, 15 April 2009: "The underlying mistake was obvious: the idea that you could somehow square the essentially pluralistic, chaotic online culture with a modus operandi still stuck somewhere between Lenin and Mayor Daley."

The UK political system is now far more internet focused than it was at the time of the last election. In 2005, the web was not a significant factor in the election. Only 28 per cent of British internet users went online to find out about the election⁸⁴ and political parties and the majority of MPs were not yet taking advantage of the web 2.0 possibilities of the net.

But by mid- 2009 all the major British political parties had a presence on the social networking sites, Facebook, Myspace, Bebo and Twitter. Only the Conservative Party did not have an official YouTube Channel but it had Webcameron. And in addition to the party profiles, the leaders of both the Liberal Democrats and the British National Party had personal profiles on Facebook. All the parties also had at least some web 2.0 tools on their websites to encourage visitors to donate money or contribute ideas.

And there has been a big change in individual politicians' engagement with Web 2.0 since the last election when social networking sites were only in their nascent stages. Andy Williamson conducted a survey of MPs internet use for the Hansard Society and found what he called a surprising surge in online social networking across all parties. He conducted his survey in April/May 2008 and found almost universal use of email and that 83 per cent of politicians had a personal website. He said "the most notable increase has been in social networking from only 3% of MPs in 2005 to 23% today," with Facebook the most popular social networking site. And while he did not specifically ask about twitter in his survey, he said he asked about it subsequently and found that there were two politicians using twitter in December 2008 but by April 2009, there were fifty. By contrast, blogging remained unpopular with only 11 per cent of politicians engaging in it. Williamson said there were no obvious differences in approach to the internet between the major parties and that the differences between individual MP's internet approaches were more likely to be related to the safety of a politician's seat and the length of their time in office, than their party affiliation.⁸⁵

Institutional Differences US and UK:

Yet despite this surge in online social networking by British politicians and their parties, Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick identify a series of institutional differences between the British and US political systems that they argue make Britain's political players less open to Obama-style e-campaigning innovations.⁸⁶

Anstead and Chadwick say that the more centralised UK system, in which political parties have more power over candidate selection and policy than in the United States, means there is less incentive for individual politicians to take risks or to be entrepreneurial in building a support base around their own candidacy. The aspiring politician in Britain needs only to convince the powerful party gatekeepers rather than members of the public of his or her political worth. In the United States, by contrast, the primary system was developed specifically to challenge the power of the parties. And to make it in the primary process, a US political candidate needs to build a strong personal profile, a national public support base and an independent source of funds.

⁸⁴ Stephen Coleman and Stephen Ward (eds) , *Spinning the Web: online campaigning in the 2005 General Election*, Hansard Society, 2005, p14

⁸⁵ Andy Williamson, "The effect of digital media on MPs' communication with constituents", Oxford University Press on behalf of the Hansard Society, May 13, 2009.

⁸⁶ Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick, "Parties, election campaigning and the Internet: Toward a comparative institutional approach, in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, *The Routledge Handbook in Internet Politics*, Routledge, 2008

This difference in the two political systems means that the database building power of social networking sites, which was demonstrated by the Obama team, may be less relevant in the UK.

That is certainly the way Labour MP Derek Wyatt sees it. He started the Westminster All Party Internet Group when he first came to parliament in 1997 and is one of Britain's most web 2.0 savvy politicians. But in terms of the Labour party adopting elements of the Obama e-campaign, he says: "We've poured over the Obama camp. We sent people from the Labour party. We've had them over here. But I can't actually see the relevance. The difficulty with Britain following Obama is that we don't have Presidential elections. We have prime ministerial elections like Australia so we don't have the clamour and we don't have the money need and in a sense that was really what Obama was about with his micro payments."⁸⁷

This absence of a nationwide personal vote for a Prime Ministerial candidate, as distinct from a party candidate in an individual seat, means that there is no incentive in Britain for a political aspirant to build a national database of supporters. Party leaders are selected internally by the party and then voted into parliament by their own electorates with the head of the winning party becoming the Prime Minister.

Former Liberal Democrat MP, Richard Allan, who was also a campaign advisor to Party leader, Nick Clegg, says the system is so local in the UK that mass databases are redundant and possibly even dangerous. "Here three to four thousand people vote for you within the party and then twenty five thousand people vote for you in the electorate. So e-campaigning is not critical to winning an election. But it could lose you one."⁸⁸

This focus on the risks more than the opportunities of web 2.0 style political campaigning is a common theme among political strategists in Britain. And it is particularly noticeable when it comes to attempts to adapt the campaign organising techniques used by the Obama campaign to a British setting.

The political risks of Web 2.0:

They may have more power in political campaigning than their counterparts in the US but all major British political parties have been suffering from a decline in membership for decades.⁸⁹ The Labour party, for example had "more than one million members over and above union affiliates," in 1952. Yet "by the 1980s the party had a membership of fewer than 300,000 people." And by "2007 the party was down to 182,000 members."⁹⁰

Given this, it may appear logical that the Obama approach to building a support base online might appeal as a way to bolster the campaigning resources where the membership is thin on the ground.

⁸⁷ Derek Wyatt, Labour MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, 1997- , head of the Westminster All Party Internet Group, interviewed London 8 July 2009

⁸⁸ Richard Allan, Liberal Democrat MP for Sheffield Hallam 1997-2005 and campaign manager for Party Leader, Nick Clegg, 2005-2008, interviewed London, 28 May 2009

⁸⁹ See Elizabeth McLain, "Ch 11: Political Participation and Protest" in Patrick Dunleavy, Andrew Gamble, Ian Holliday, Gillian Peele (Eds) *Developments in British Politics 6*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004

⁹⁰ Nick Anstead and Will Straw, "Conclusion," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds) , *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p 97

But as the London Director of Obama's digital strategy company, Matthew McGregor, explains, it is the downside rather than the upside of the Obama organising strategy that gets attention in Britain. "I'll give you an example, the online phone bank. When I talk about that concept to political parties here and in Europe, every single time I do, every single time, the first question is how do you stop supporters from the opposition parties using the phone bank. The first question is not that's amazing how can we maximise the number of people getting involved or how can we link it to something else we're doing. Always the first question is about the risks."⁹¹

This fear about a party being more open to manipulation if it has a less rigorous membership system does have a historical basis. In the 1980s the British Labour party was almost torn apart by what became known as "entryism" where extremist groups on the left surged in to fill the declining membership base of the party and in the process changed its policy direction. The electoral success of the Labour party since then has reinforced the logic of a "culture of centralised politics at the heart of Labour"⁹² The party leadership is understandably wary of an approach which would involve lowering barriers to entry to the party's membership and allowing anyone access to the party's voter databases.

But Labour insider, Philip Bassett, says the Labour Party cannot continue with this approach and that it has a lot to learn from the Obama campaign: "I worked for Tony Blair for seven years and we perfected the top down model of political communication. That needs to change. There is no doubt. It needs to be more participatory. That is the Labour party's biggest challenge." Bassett, who is also a former political editor at *The Financial Times* newspaper, said of the expenses scandal: "I've never seen anything like it since Watergate" and that its impact "just can't be underestimated."

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In February 2009, the Labour party did adopt one of the Obama campaign's most successful canvassing innovations, the online phonebank, that allowed supporters to make phone calls to prospective voters from home. The Labour Party's former deputy and one of its most visible online politicians, John Prescott, launched the Virtual Phonebank on YouTube.⁹⁴ And the party made much of being ahead of the Conservative party in online campaigning.⁹⁵ However the Labour Party's Virtual Phonebank is open only to party members – a situation that some internal critics call "a members only 'walled garden.'"⁹⁶ Members who are interested are given a series of numbers to call and a list of questions to ask and are then required to enter the responses into the party database.

The Labour Party's headquarters was claiming it as a great success when 15,709 calls had been made on its Phonebank by 1,083 users in its first 90 days.⁹⁷ However this was marred somewhat by online

⁹¹ Matthew McGregor, Director, Blue State Digital UK, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

⁹² Nick Anstead and Will Straw, "Conclusion," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p 97

⁹³ Philip Bassett, Chief of Staff to Leader of Lords, media advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair 2000-2007, interviewed Oxford, 15 May 2009.

⁹⁴ John Prescott, Labour's official YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lt2sOrFCNO>

⁹⁵ "Definitive proof – the Tories are playing catch up to Labour in online campaigning" Labourlist.org

⁹⁶ Nick Anstead and Will Straw, "Conclusion," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p103

⁹⁷ "Huge early success for Labour's online phonebank" Labour affiliated website, labourlist.org

feedback to the Labourlist site which suggested that the list of questions volunteers were to ask still related to the European Union elections two weeks after the polls had closed.⁹⁸

Just looking modern?

Blue State Digital's Matthew McGregor says parties in Britain are not yet committing the resources to running sustainable online campaign strategies. And he is sceptical about their reasons for adopting some Obama-style strategies. The major British parties, for example, have web 2.0 adaptations on their sites asking for feedback on policy. But McGregor suggests they are doing this more for show than to genuinely engage in a discussion with members of the public: "A lot of politicians say yes we should do that 'asking people' thing – it will look really good."⁹⁹

James Frayne, from the conservative political consulting firm, Portland, is more direct. He says politicians don't want to know what their supporters think. "The political class don't want people outside the Westminster bubble involved. The public might not trust the politicians but the politicians don't trust the public either, especially those on the conservative side of politics who are more likely than not to have embarrassingly extreme views on things like immigration. There is definitely a fear on the right of giving those sort of people too much power."¹⁰⁰

On the Labour side of politics, the fear of letting the public voice an opinion meant that up until 2006, no online comments from members of the public were published on the party's website until they had been individually approved by the General Secretary of the Party.¹⁰¹ That has now changed and public comments are uncensored.

But Andy Williamson, in summarising his Hansard survey, does not see the rise in politicians' use of social networking sites necessarily signalling a greater interest in the views of the public. He concludes that "digital media are largely being used to publish and not to engage."¹⁰²

What about the money?

Given declining party membership and the associated drop in revenue flowing from membership fees, online fundraising might seem a risk-free area for British politicians to adapt some of the Obama e-campaigning techniques.

Will Straw and Nick Anstead do the calculations to show that the Obama campaign was able to extract better value per supporter through its online fundraising drive than the Labour Party was through its membership fees: "the party takes 4 million pounds per year from its membership fees and an additional 2.3 million from top up donations.... That's roughly 20 pounds per subscription member compared to 120 pounds (US\$170) per supporter from Obama donors."¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Virtual phone banking. Do people know the system is still telling us to ask questions about the Euro elections on June 4th? #labour doorstep ricjgreen (Rich Green) @ 2009-06-17 18:28:55 (labourlist .org)

⁹⁹ Matthew McGregor, Director, Blue State Digital UK, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

¹⁰⁰ James Frayne, Director, Campaign Unit, Portland PR, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

¹⁰¹ Luke Bozier, e-campaign advisor to the Labour Party 2006-2007, interviewed London, 11 May 2009

¹⁰² Andy Williamson, "The effect of digital media on MPs' communication with constituents", Oxford University Press on behalf of the Hansard Society, May 13, 2009

¹⁰³ Nick Anstead and Will Straw, "Conclusion," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds), *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009

But Anstead and Chadwick point out that there are significant differences in the campaign fundraising environments in the US and the UK, which provide an incentive to a small dollar online fundraising model in the United States and a disincentive to one in Britain.

The most obvious difference is the overall cost of campaigning. More than one and a half billion dollars was spent in total by the candidates in the 2008 US campaign. In the last UK election the equivalent cost was 185 million US dollars.¹⁰⁴ But of more importance is the divergence in the rules on political fundraising.

In the United States there is a federal cap of 2,300 dollars on the amount an individual can donate to a political campaign, but no limit on the overall size of that campaign fund. This provides a prospective politician with an incentive to tap multiple small donors to raise a bigger campaign fund.

In the United Kingdom, by contrast, there is no cap on the size of individual donations but, in the year 2000, a cap was imposed on the amount that a party can spend nationally during an election campaign period. Anstead points out that: "as a result a significant proportion of donations to British political parties come from a small number of large donors."¹⁰⁵ And there is little incentive for parties to work on raising a larger fund from multiple small donors.

Labour MP Derek Wyatt also notes that the culture of donating is not strong in Britain: "it's an anathema. We just don't do it – we feel uncomfortable donating." Of the phone bank initiative he says: "it's not bad but then when you get say an Australian phoning who doesn't know about your constituency then my potential voter is just going to put the phone down."¹⁰⁶

Then there are the contrasting rules on mainstream television advertising. In the United States, candidates must pay for television advertising time but the amount of advertising they can air is limited only by what they can afford. Hence Obama was able to run his half hour television advertisement in prime time on seven channels in the last week of the campaign and massively outspend his rival, John McCain.

In the United Kingdom however, political parties are banned from buying television advertising time. Parties are instead allotted a series of slots for election broadcasts on the mainstream media for free. There are as yet no political advertising restrictions on web 2.0 platforms. So while there is no need to raise large sums of money to buy airtime, would British political parties raise funds in order to produce advertisements that they could run on non-traditional media players, like YouTube?

Portland media consultant, James Frayne, says he suggested just such a strategy to the Conservative Party. He wanted to run an internet based campaign advocating small government to capitalise on the public antagonism towards politicians that has been generated by the expenses crisis. But he says the response from the Conservative Party leader was lukewarm: "David Cameron is quite

¹⁰⁴ Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick, "Parties, election campaigning and the Internet: Toward a comparative institutional approach, in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, *The Routledge Handbook in Internet Politics*, Routledge, 2008, p66

¹⁰⁵ Anstead, Nick, "The Internet and Campaign Finance in the U.S. and the UK: An Institutional Comparison", *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, October 2008, p297

¹⁰⁶ Derek Wyatt, Labour MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, 1997- , head of the Westminster All Party Internet Group, interviewed London 8 July 2009

cautious. He has a marketing background but he's not ever really going to do an anti-politics argument. He doesn't want to risk new style politics now that he is in front in the polls."¹⁰⁷

The Nexus between British Politicians and the Mainstream Media:

In Britain, the relationship between the key gatekeepers of political information: the political parties and politicians, and the political journalists, remains close – many would say too close. The columnist for the Times, David Aaronovitch, says the British parliamentary lobby reporting system “is hugely problematic. You get lifetime journalists involved in almost lifetime relationships with politicians and I think it skews their judgement about what's important.”¹⁰⁸ One of those lobby journalists, Andrew Sparrow from the Guardian, agrees that the relationships can be so close that “It is the same as embedding journalists in wars. Lobby correspondents are essentially embedded political journalists.”¹⁰⁹ But while Sparrow is prepared to admit the potential dangers in this and says many political journalists are reluctant to “turn over their sources”, he does not see this preventing them from providing the traditional fourth estate, political watch dog role on behalf of the public.

Paul Staines, the blogger responsible for the McBride email scandal, disagrees. He says the McBride story was as much about exposing a corrupted relationship between political journalists and political players as it was about lifting the lid on sleazy Labour party tactics. He says the News of the World editor to whom he took his evidence was not surprised by the story: “the political editor looked at it for 5 seconds and he'd obviously received emails like that from Damien McBride. He went ‘yep’ there was no kind of authentication question, how do I know this isn't a fraud. He knew straight away.”¹¹⁰ Staines says he wanted to expose what he viewed as an unhealthy relationship between journalists and their sources that meant the McBride email sleaze story was going unreported, despite many journalists being aware of it.

According to Matthew McGregor, the mainstream political players have not yet fully understood the public antagonism to the gatekeeping role of political elites, including journalists. He says the McBride affair indicated that the Labour party was more interested in trying to set the mainstream news agenda than to engage with the public via new web 2.0 sites. “The McBride thing was all about trying to influence the mainstream media.” And he says the Labour party is not alone in this approach: “All of the parties are basically good at web 1.0. They've all got nice looking websites. They've all got some nice tools that people can use. They all post on Facebook. They all do a lot of video that people can watch. But all the parties are stuck on transmission. ... All of the parties are operating with a Westminster mindset, the insider game of how can we do something online that will help us get some headlines.”¹¹¹

Will Web 2.0 produce an Obama in Britain?

Labour MP Derek Wyatt, who is not contesting the next election, says that even the expenses scandal and the popularity of web 2.0 groups like 38 Degrees will not see British politicians engaging more with the public. He says that would require far more radical change than is being

¹⁰⁷ James Frayne, Director, Campaign Unit, Portland PR, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

¹⁰⁸ David Aaronovitch, Columnist, *The Times*, interviewed Oxford, 1 May, 2009

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Sparrow, Senior Political Correspondent, Guardian, interviewed London, 11 May 2009

¹¹⁰ Paul Staines, , blogger “Guido Fawkes”, interviewed in London 11 May 2009

¹¹¹ Matthew McGregor, Director, Blue State Digital UK, interviewed London, 27 May 2009

contemplated: "It isn't possible for the citizen to come to parliament. There isn't a system like in the US where you can petition. And I think that's what this whole scandal has thrown up is that we are so far behind in terms of citizens and that we have to change that before we can expect to see any effect from web 2.0. The citizen needs to come to parliament. Q So when will that happen? Never!"¹¹²

Former Blair advisor, Luke Bozier, agrees that radical change would be required before an Obama level of enthusiasm could be generated in the UK. He says "we need constitutional change. The system just disenfranchises people. I think that people want to have a direct say in who is Prime Minister. People voting in the US have a direct hand in who is elected and they feel engaged and there is an energy about it. I don't think you could replicate that here right now."¹¹³

Will Straw and Nick Anstead are urging their party to make fundamental changes in the face of the surge in online political action that accompanied the expenses scandal: "Labour must unlearn several of the techniques which were successful in the early years of 24/7 media in the 1990s but which are now inappropriate and counter-productive."¹¹⁴

But Matthew McGregor says he doesn't believe that any of Britain's political parties are hearing this message strongly enough to significantly change their mode of operating in time for the next UK election. He says third party political players like trade unions are beginning to see the benefits of online social networking for more targeted campaigns, like the campaign to stop citizens from reacting to the expenses scandal by voting for the British National Party during the European Union elections. He is predicting, though, that it will be the election after next before the British public will see any major change in their mainstream political and media culture.

¹¹² Derek Wyatt, Labour MP for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, 1997- , head of the Westminster All Party Internet Group, interviewed London 8 July 2009

¹¹³ Luke Bozier, former Blair e-campaign advisor, interviewed London, 11 May 2009

¹¹⁴ Nick Anstead and Will Straw, "Conclusion," Nick Anstead and Will Straw (eds) , *The Change We Need: what Britain can learn from Obama's victory*, Fabien Society, 2009, p94 and p102

CONCLUSION

So did Barack Obama's internet focused election campaign deliver a new more democratic kind of politics, as web 2.0 optimists – and indeed Obama himself – have claimed?

In chapter one, I examined the arguments for and against the power of web 2.0 to challenge the political and media culture of the TV age election campaign. In chapter two, I examined the web 2.0 elements of the Obama campaign in detail. And in chapter three, I looked at the extent to which an Obama-style politics may emerge in Britain, with the expenses crisis prompting calls for fundamental political change.

I concluded that the Obama campaign is less revolutionary than it at first appears and that there are a range of reasons why it is unlikely that British politicians will follow even some of the more risk-free elements of the Obama e-campaign.

The Obama campaign showed that online social networking can be a powerful political tool and the US President's web supporters are justified in claiming this as the first election victory for YouTube politics. But it also showed that a web 2.0 community can be harnessed to a fairly traditional campaign hierarchy and could be open to manipulation by the very political gatekeepers it claims to be challenging.

Obama's is a story of how web 2.0 helped an outsider to get into the race for the White House but then how the candidate's campaign used social networking to increase several important levers of its power. The campaign amassed a huge database of supporter contacts and information, it raised the biggest war chest of funds in US history and it used the web to marshal and direct its online supporters. It also used the internet to counter one of the other political power centres in the campaigning environment, the mainstream media. In doing all of this there were negotiations made and, sometimes uneasy, alliances formed. The Obama team directed political activity but did not squash dissent, as campaign directors in a TV age campaign might have done. It broke away from the old "war room" approach to data that was characterised by secrecy and central control and gave supporters more autonomy in the way they involved themselves in the political campaign. The web 2.0 community showed it was powerful and Obama's embrace of it meant many more citizens did engage in the political process. But this was still a political campaign with the goal of winning power and was strikingly similar in key respects to an old-style top down, command and control political operation.

As for British politicians emulating elements of the Obama e-campaign to re-engage citizens and re-invigorate the democratic process, most players agreed it appears unlikely to happen any time soon, despite the expenses crisis. While many MPs and citizens are increasingly using web 2.0 to engage in politics, institutional and cultural differences between the US and the UK make it unlikely Britain will ever see Obama-levels of enthusiasm for using web 2.0 in political campaigns.

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