

# Obama's democracy 2.0

A briefing paper on President Obama's new approach to governance



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## Introduction

Much has been made of Barack Obama's masterful use of the internet during his Presidential campaign. Obama was the first person to achieve over 1 million friends on Facebook. His own social network [mybarackobama.com](http://mybarackobama.com) chalked up 2 million accounts. He was the first major political figure to embrace Twitter – now with 1 million+ friends – and, crucially, Obama raised \$500 million from more than 3 million individual donations online.

In the context of Senator Obama's radical and successful use of the internet to win the Presidency, commentators wildly speculated about how President Obama would then use the internet to govern. Would he run the first ever Twit-ocracy and use Twitter to solve his country's problems? Would he run an enlarged collaborative People's Cabinet via Facebook?

Now, months into President Obama's period of governance, this paper gives an introductory briefing into the realities of how his vision of 'democracy 2.0' is shaping up and where it might move next.



## Setting out his stall

On day two of his Presidency, Obama boldly set out his stall with a Memorandum to his heads of departments headed "Transparency and Open Government", detailing the guiding principles by which he wanted to govern. The main headers of the Memorandum opened with three statements of intent:

- 'Government should be transparent',
- 'Government should be participatory' and
- 'Government should be collaborative'.<sup>1</sup>

The Memorandum went on to clearly explain the supporting reasons for these principles, and set a 120 day timeline for each department to sort out their stall in line with the Open Government Directive.

## Participatory governance

Obama knows why he's in power – he's in power because of the American people: the people who voted for him, the people who campaigned for him on the streets and the people who donated their hard-earned cash. As one commentator put it "the American people for the first time own the government – after all, they paid micro-payments to bring him to power. It's the first time lobbyists don't. Importantly, now they're in government, they need to live up to it".

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/)

It's in this context of public engagement, participation and donations that Obama was propelled into power and it seems he feels indebted to the people as a result – something that he keeps reminding himself (and others) of in his speeches. As he put it in his victory speech:

“ *But above all, I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to. It belongs to you. It belongs to you. I was never the likeliest candidate for this office. We didn't start with much money or many endorsements. Our campaign was not hatched in the halls of Washington. It began in the backyards of Des Moines and the living rooms of Concord and the front porches of Charleston. It was built by working men and women who dug into what little savings they had to give \$5 and \$10 and \$20 to the cause.*

It's perhaps because of this indebtedness that President Obama is so keen to place people at the heart of his model of democracy. After all, if the people so successfully helped him get into power, why not carry on that success and involve people more closely in the governance of their country?

### Collaborative governance

Of course, Obama's people-oriented governance goes beyond emotion and is importantly fixed in solid, modern social theory. I'm guessing that on his bedside table, next to his photo of Bo the dog, he has a stack of books like *Bowling Alone*, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* and *The Wisdom of Crowds*. President Obama clearly understands the importance of social capital, notions of markets as conversations, the ineffectiveness of command and control management styles, the value of collective knowledge in policy-problem solving. All these theories were seen in practice in his Presidential campaign and are evidently theories that he wants to use to govern effectively.



Photo from MikeBlogs on Flickr

### Transparent governance

Principles also play a major part in Obama's new approach to governance. The opening line to his "Transparency and Open Government memorandum" shows the principles that will underpin his style of governance:

“ *My Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government.*

## Embracing the new world order

In developing his model for governance, President Obama has clearly understood how the social fabric of society has radically changed in the last few years from one of deference and centralised control to one of engagement and participation.

Obama's approach to governance is more akin to agile social companies like Facebook and Google, taking a more bottom-up collaborative approach to governance and looking to innovate through iterative improvements in process. Having said that, it's much easier to innovate from new than it is dealing with the complexities of legacy systems, and together with over 250 million stakeholders to embrace, progress will inevitably be slower than liked.

## Social first, media second

But what about the technology? Surely Obama's first love is playing around on Facebook, not reading *Cluetrain*? (The answer, of course, is that Obama's first love is shooting hoops). Actually, one of the first mistakes when analysing the impact of social media is getting over-awed by the technological wizardry and forgetting the social bit. Obama's approach to governance (and politics in general) has never been *about* technology but about people. For him, technology is purely a means to an end. If the internet didn't exist, he'd invent it.



When Obama first set up his election campaign, he didn't go out like some kind of technology magpie and find the shiniest new piece of social networking kit but instead enlisted a team of psychologists (Ganz and Wageman) from Harvard University.<sup>2</sup> Using something called the Sierra Club as a test-base, the Harvard team looked at how best to engineer a strong grass-roots campaign. In so doing, they identified key contributing factors such as the damaging role of lone rangers and the importance of having a connected team with strong relationships and a shared purpose. It was in this context of social scientific research that Obama's overall campaign process was developed and then scaled up through the use of technology. Theory first, technology second.

## Testing the model

With his trademark calm, Obama hasn't rushed into delivering his new form of governance. That's partly for practical reasons – the White House web team is run by a staff of roughly five, compared to the hundreds that ran his Presidential campaign – but more importantly because he wants to get things right.

To that end, Obama's administration have been trialing a number of online pilot projects looking at using the internet to facilitate a more participative approach to governance.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2008/10/obamas-secret-w/>

## Case study: White House Open for Questions\*

### Background

The White House Office of New Media launched [Open for Questions](#) on [whitehouse.gov](#) to engage Americans from around the country on the economy. For two days, citizens were encouraged to submit questions at [whitehouse.gov](#) via text or video, as well as to rate questions submitted by others. President Obama then responded to several of the top questions via an online town hall held at the White House and streamed live on [whitehouse.gov](#)

### Objectives

The trial run of Open for Questions was a new experiment for [whitehouse.gov](#), adding to the President's efforts to open up the White House and give Americans from around the country a direct line to the Administration. The goal was to open up the White House to the people so they could understand what government was doing to get the economy back on track and have a chance to participate. The public was encouraged to ask the President exactly what they wanted to know about the economy.

A secondary goal was to sponsor a project that allowed the public and the government to experience firsthand the potential of new media in communicating with the White House.



### What happened

The principles used in designing Open for Questions were:

- Simplicity, allowing anyone to participate
- Well-defined participation guidelines
- Clear expectations of what would happen with public's questions
- Allowing the community to moderate themselves

The technology used to run the process was Google Moderator, a tool that allows anyone visiting the site to submit and rank questions. The overall user-experience was simple:

- ▶ Users viewed/searched existing questions.
- ▶ If they supported an existing question, they could rate it (up or down). The most popular questions then rose to the top.
- ▶ Users could also add their own questions. Questions could be added either via text or as a video. Questions were organised in broad categories (e.g. education, home ownership etc).
- ▶ The President answered the top text questions and a couple of popular video questions from many of the categories during an online town hall and also answered live questions from the live audience. Other members of the Administration addressed more of the questions after the event.

The process was summarised nicely in President Obama's introductory call to action video:

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\* *The White House Open for Questions case study content is partly taken from the official White House project case study.*

 *The White House is open for questions.*

*We invite you to participate in our community-moderated online town hall. Submit your own question about the economy and rate submissions from others. We also encourage you to include a link to a video of yourself asking your question (ideally 30 seconds or less), but text submissions are all you need. Come back on Thursday to watch the President answer some of the most popular submissions live at WhiteHouse.gov.*

## Outcomes

Over a period of less than 48 hours, 92,927 people submitted 104,127 questions and cast 3,606,825 ratings (an average of 38 ratings per participant). All questions could be viewed online and there were 1 million visits and 1.4 million views of the Open for Questions page.<sup>3</sup>

The high level of public participation in such a short timeframe shows the importance of, and enthusiasm among citizens for, a public discussion.

*Open for Questions* greatly expanded the range of people who could participate. People from every state participated. The questions submitted by video (<1% of submissions) were compelling, creating even more of a personal connection with the person(s) asking the question.

For example, three students from Kent State University in Ohio created a video asking President Obama a question on paying for college. The video was shown and answered by the President at the White House, online at whitehouse.gov and across national TV and other media networks.



The exercise gave the President and policy makers a better sense of what was on people's minds during tough economic times. The exercise has generated a wealth of questions which can be used in the future, as evidenced by others in the Administration answering additional questions in the weeks following the online town hall.

## Analysis

This experiment provided new perspectives on both the advantages and potential issues for implementing new media strategies at the White House and in the government in order to open up government to the people and allow them to participate.

Some of the factors leading to success included:

- Buy-in from the top
- Bringing in outside innovation where needed
- Keeping the project simple
- A clear concept to the public of the project's intentions, with well-defined participation guidelines and expectations of what would happen with the public's questions
- Allowing the community to mostly moderate themselves
- Something new and exciting which engaged the public

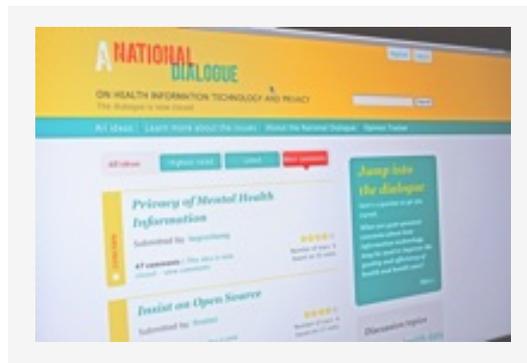
<sup>3</sup> Statistics from the official White House Open for Questions case study

## Case study: Recovery.gov dialogue<sup>†</sup>

### Background

In February 2009, President Obama signed the Recovery Act, a piece of legislation designed to help rebuild the American economy and invest in the nation's vital needs. An underlying principle of the Recovery Act was transparency, with a focus on openly showing how each dollar was spent.

To ensure transparency, the Recovery Board agreed to set up the recovery.gov portal – designed to provide real-time information on the funds allocated in the Recovery Act, how those funds are being used and their tangible impact on economic growth and job creation.



Because of the scale of the challenge of setting up the recovery.gov portal, the Recovery Board decided to invite IT industry leaders, as well as members of the general public, to be involved in solving the problem. To do this, a week-long online dialogue – dubbed a “[Recovery Dialogue on Information Technology Solutions](#)” – was initiated, in which people could submit original ideas on how best to implement different aspects of the recovery.gov portal.

### Objectives

While the Dialogue was an expression of the Recovery Board's emphasis on transparency and openness, it was primarily intended to solve a genuine problem: the need to gather innovative ideas and perspectives and survey the landscape of possible solutions, and to do so from a broader audience, more quickly, and in a more collaborative way than a formal Request For Information process would allow.

Specifically, the Recovery Board sought to accomplish two core goals:

- To engage a diverse community of relevant participants in a dynamic, real-time dialogue aimed at generating innovative ideas and approaches for tracking and accounting for stimulus spending and determining how this data should be reported upon
- To foster a durable community of thought leaders that could be engaged repeatedly over time to inform and bring innovation to the U.S.'s recovery.

### What happened

The principles used in designing the Recovery Dialogue were:

- Knowledge sharing: creating an online space where users could share ideas.
- Debate: providing online tools to allow users to provide feedback on each others' ideas.
- Self-organisation: providing mechanics to allow users to self-organise and tag data, improving the user-experience.
- Low-barriers to participation: ensuring people of different internet and subject literacy could take part in the dialogue in different ways either by viewing, rating, commenting or adding new ideas.

<sup>†</sup> The Recovery Dialogue case study content is partly taken from the official National Academy of Public Administration project report.

The technology used was NAPA's Dialogue platform, an online tool that facilitates online idea-sharing and debate. The typical user experience was:

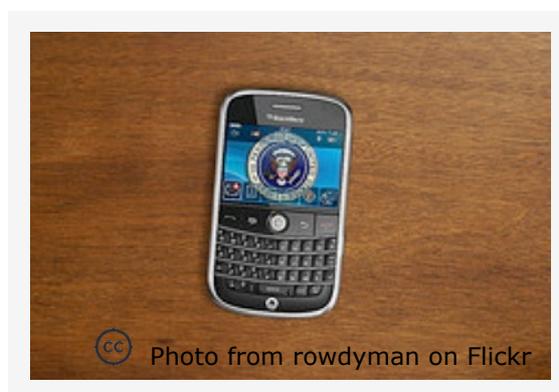
- ▶ User visits site, watches introductory video and views existing ideas. Ideas could be viewed in a number of different ways: by latest, highest rated, most commented on, or via their tag.
- ▶ If users like or dislike existing ideas, they have the option to rate and comment on those ideas.
- ▶ Users could also add their own ideas to the dialogue – tagging them to help make them easily discoverable.
- ▶ If a user's idea was commented on, they received an automatic email to inform them, therefore inspiring further debate.

### Outcomes

The overall objectives of the Dialogue were to generate good-quality ideas, and also high-levels of good quality participation.

Over the course of seven days, the Dialogue site, [www.thenationaldialogue.org](http://www.thenationaldialogue.org), received:

- 34,519 visits from 22,376 unique visitors, with the average visitor spending seven minutes and 32 seconds on the site.
- 288,224 page views, with the average visitor looking at between seven and eight pages.
- 542 unique ideas, producing 1,330 comments, 2,220 votes, and 559 tags.<sup>4</sup>



Most impressive of all was the quality of the ideas submitted and the quality of the discussion around these ideas. The Dialogue model clearly provided a simple and engaging way for policy makers to mass crowd-source and solve a specific policy implementation challenge.

### Analysis

The Recovery Dialogue demonstrated a new way of running policy roundtable ideas-sharing events. Compared to the traditional policy roundtable format, which would usually involve 20 or so stakeholders sitting at a table for a couple of hours, the National Dialogue model was a true innovation which enabled 20,000+ people to be involved in the policy making process.

Key factors for this model's success include:

- Scalability: because of the scalability of online technologies like NAPA's Dialogue platform, it's possible to scale from 2,000 people to 20,000 people relatively easily.
- Value for money: the cost of running large-scale processes using technology is relatively low, meaning that online policy-development processes like the Recovery.gov Dialogue provide good value for money.
- Transparency and collaboration: unlike traditional policy-making processes which have taken place in closed rooms involving a limited number of participants, online policy-making provides an open forum through which ideas can be shared and debated amongst a much larger group of people.
- Deliberation: the quality of the ideas provided is testament to the effective deliberative environment the Dialogue platform provides.

<sup>4</sup> All statistics taken from the official Recovery.gov dialogue end of project report

## What next?

President Obama's initial democracy 2.0 initiatives have been a success, however it has definitely been a case of dipping his toe into the online democratic sea rather than going for an all out Twitocracy. Setting out his principles early on has been his most important move, with his numerous democracy 2.0 innovations like Data.gov giving an indication of where he'd like to take things next.

To reach the next level, Obama has a number of things to address, including:

- **Open source:** working with the Open Source community to create a collaborative approach towards building applications to facilitate better governance. Crowd-sourcing to build crowd-sourcing applications.
- **Data standards:** looking at creating open data-standards e.g. using the W3C's "Open Linked Data standards". This will ensure transparency, and optimise the ability of the Open Source community to innovate and empower citizens.
- **Democracy 2.0 toolkits:** guidance needs to be provided across agencies, to ensure best-practice can be spread across the whole of government.

It is genuinely exciting to watch Obama's new form of governance unfold. As I write this, Vivek Kundra, the Federal CIO, has written a post on the White House blog on the subject of "enhancing online citizen participation through policy", giving a taste of the new rules of engagement for Obama's democracy 2.0 and his new form of collaborative governance.

## About the author

Chris Quigley is co-founder of e-democracy company Delib (<http://www.delib.co.uk>). Delib is a leading provider of online consultation, opinion research and debate tools, helping UK, New Zealand and US government organisations to understand, engage, and connect with their citizens.

Delib is particularly proud to partner the National Academy of Administration (NAPA) in the US, providing the software for several successful National Dialogues including work for the Department of Homeland Security and other US Federal government organisations. [www.thenationaldialogue.org](http://www.thenationaldialogue.org)

Delib is a UK company (based in Bristol and London) founded in 2004. Delib US (based in Washington DC) is planned to launch in the next few months.

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