

crowds & collectivities in networked electoral politics

What happens when a crowd decides to think for itself? **Daniel Kreiss** explores the answer in the 2008 Obama campaign.



◀ President Barack Obama checks his BlackBerry. (Photo: The White House.)

THROUGHOUT the long primary season, the 2008 Obama campaign's powerful suite of networked electoral tools fueled the candidate's outsider bid for the presidency. A thirteen million member email list helped raise hundreds of millions of dollars online. The nearly two million supporters with active accounts on the campaign's electoral platform helped power the incredible 'crowdsourcing' of field operations. Millions of supporters working alone, or gathering in geographic and affinity groups, canvassed communities across the country, providing critical organizational infrastructure for the campaign in key states.

Supporter involvement was by design in both a planned and technical sense. Staffers in the campaign's New Media Division carefully set their goals, defined metrics

for supporter involvement, and then measured their progress. Staffers honed data and analytic practices to optimize the content and format of emails, increase the likelihood of desired supporter actions, and track response rates. Meanwhile, the My.BarackObama.com (MyBO) electoral platform was the product of years of strategic planning and technical development. Consultants designed the platform to facilitate

supporter participation in electoral activities such as fundraising, voter identification, and turnout operations. Through these designed-in "affordances" (Norman 1988), these tools translated the extraordinary mobilization around Obama into the money, message, and votes the campaign needed. The campaign's effort to crowdsource these electoral tasks generally proceeded smoothly throughout the primaries and general election. The goals of supporters and the campaign were closely aligned around defeating Hillary Clinton and John McCain. With shared goals, the crowd was content to embrace the tasks that staffers set for it through its technologies that coordinated work in lieu of formal management structures. Like many other crowdsourced efforts in domains from the design of T-

shirts on sites such as Threadless (Brabham 2010) to reviewing patent applications on Peer-to-Patent (Noveck 2006), the goals were clear and outcomes defined (Fish et al., 2011) for this project.

And yet, technologies are always “interpretively flexible” (Orlikowski, 1992), usable for ends their designers did not intend. At extraordinary moments a sizable portion of the crowd was no longer content to have its participation defined by the campaign. Such was the case in the protests that emerged in opposition to Obama’s newfound support of retroactive immunity for the telecommunications firms that assisted the Bush administration in its warrantless wiretapping program once he became the nominee. Through their engagement with the campaign’s network tools, members of the crowd drew on their latent agency to become a collective and define their own goals, purpose, and identity. In doing so, they leveraged the affordances of the campaign’s very own technologies to take collective action and hold the candidate accountable for his policy shift.

THE ROUTINE WORK OF CROWDS

Mobilization presupposes ‘crowds.’ There must be some motivation, desire, or interest that mobilizes individuals before an entity such as a political campaign can crowdsource a set of actions it needs accomplished. Michael Slaby, the 2008 campaign’s Chief Technology Officer, describes how his colleagues “didn’t have to generate desire very often. We had to capture and empower interest and desire... We made intelligent decisions that kept it growing but I don’t think anybody can really claim we started something.”¹ The “transformational and transcendent desire” of Obama’s supporters for a new kind of politics (Knorr Cetina, 2009) and the political opportunity to elect a Democrat and African-American to the presidency provided this mobilization. The challenge for

the campaign lay in coordinating these mobilized supporters to act in concert with one another for the staples of contemporary American electioneering: fundraising, voter identification, and turnout.

Obama’s staffers faced what sociologist Katherine Chen (2009) describes as the dilemma of “under- and overorganizing” that is a feature of voluntaristic organizations. As Chen argues, the challenge of voluntarism is in crafting hybrid organizational forms that mix “collectivist and bureaucratic practices, but avoid exercising coercive control” (21). Under- and overorganizing cause what Albert Hirschman (1970) referred to as “exit.” In voluntaristic relations, individuals can always drop out or leave the crowd, so they need to feel continually that they have agency and that their contributions are meaningful. Too little in the way of formal management means that contributions are not coordinated or useful to the campaign, leading to a highly dispersed crowd pursuing ill-defined and often demoralizing and ineffective tasks. Too much in the way of formal management, such as explicitly dictating what supporters need to do or using the campaign’s email list as if it were an ATM, also causes volunteers to drift away. The challenge for staffers lay in transforming amorphous desire into the distinct and recognizable shape of a crowd pursuing defined tasks; and to do so without engaging in the explicit managerial practices that volunteers, particularly those gathering in a highly distributed fashion online, would not accept. At the same time, staffers continually had to invite participation and make it meaningful, but set clear limits around what would be useful to the campaign. As one staffer described, it was always a “delicate dance” to “make sure people feel like they are involved in the campaign without giving them a sense that they are actually setting strategy.”²

Staffers crafted a number of rhetorical, organizing, and technical

practices that negotiated this dilemma on a daily basis and proved markedly durable for much of the campaign. The explicit design of the campaign’s tools helped solve this dilemma of under- and overorganizing. When programmers designed the affordances of the electoral platform, they created a management structure that directed supporter participation. The general invisibility of these design decisions to the crowd allowed the campaign to direct users subtly, avoiding the perception of overorganizing. In this sense, staffers “delegated” (Latour 1992) much coordination work to their tools, which stood in for a formal managerial relationship between the campaign and its volunteer crowds. The campaign’s new media tools had designed-in affordances that made it easy for supporters to raise and donate money for the candidate and call voters to identify their preferences. For example, My.BarackObama.com featured fundraising pages that supporters personalized by setting individual goals and circulating appeals to family and friends to donate, much like the paper-based ‘walkathon’ pledges common in nonprofit fundraising. The platform featured a calling tool that enabled supporters to access targeted scripts for contacting voters and the campaign’s voter file online so they could generate and record data on the electorate.

What these tools did not do, however, was crowdsource the candidate’s policy platform or electoral strategy. As one highly-active technical volunteer on the Obama campaign describes: “They [Obama’s campaign staff] made it very clear that they wanted you to do what you can do to become your own organizer, to use the tools to organize locally in whatever way you wanted to. They set the parameters for what the community could do as well – more specifically in language and in the actual tools.”³ These technical parameters helped ensure that supporter contributions were gen-

1. Slaby, Michael. Interview by author. New York, NY, August 18, 2010.

2. 2008 Obama campaign New Media Division staffer, personal communication

3. Neil Jensen, personal communication, November 10, 2008

erating the resources the campaign needed.

But these tools were not all powerful. While staffers used tools to capture and guide the energy of the crowd, keeping supporters working on garnering electoral resources, there were limits to their managerial authority. The technologies of the campaign were complex organizational and technical achievements predicated on years of development, bodies of knowledge and skill, and the work of dozens of staffers and supporting systems - and they often broke down (Kreiss, 2012). Even more, as Beniger (1986) reminds us, control is not deterministic, but probabilistic. These tools increased the likelihood of individual supporters pursuing the actions the campaign desired, but they did not determine that this would, in fact, be the case. There were also times when there were ruptures in the alignment of the goals and expectations of supporters and the campaign. When these happened, some members of the crowd fashioned themselves into a collective and determined their own ends for political participation. This collective found that the campaign's electoral platform itself could serve as a powerful tool for dissent.

FROM THE CROWD TO THE COLLECTIVE

Obama's crowd generally accepted the conditions of its participation, so long as the goals of the individuals taking distributed action and those of the campaign were aligned. This was the norm for most of the campaign. Supporters expected the campaign to do everything it could to win, wanting staffers to maximize their fiscal and volunteer contributions and extend the candidate's base of support. Supporters wanted Obama's opponents to be defeated and were generally willing to serve in that effort as best they could.

But what happened when the basic terms of participation in the crowd become contested? Despite

staffers' best efforts, there were extraordinary moments when a crisis caused fissures in goal alignment among the campaign and its online crowd of supporters. The Get FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) Right protests around the campaign represent precisely such a moment. Upset with the campaign for its abrupt policy shift on FISA during the general election and demanding accountability, some members of the larger crowd of Obama supporters developed an independent sense of themselves and defined their own purpose for action. New media tools, especially the campaign's own, provided "network forums" (Turner, 2006) that facilitated a transition from a crowd of individuals into a collective. These tools allowed aggrieved supporters to find and make themselves visible to one another, hone a sense of collective identity, plan and coordinate challenges to the campaign, and take the fundraising and publicity actions that drew attention to the protest. The collective used My.BarackObama.com, sites such as Facebook and YouTube, and blogs to gather and garner resources and press attention in an attempt to get Obama to change his new-found position. The organizational affordances of the tools the collective appropriated enabled the Get FISA Right protests to scale rapidly. The group on My.BarackObama.com alone swelled to over 15,000 members. These supporters raised enough money to produce a YouTube video and national cable television advertisement.

While staffers never had to respond to the crowd (they simply had to prevent exit), the collective made demands on the candidate that in the end the campaign was forced to address given the scale of the protests. Obama did not change his position on the bill, but the candidate addressed the Get FISA Right supporters directly through a written statement explaining his position. The campaign also made two senior foreign policy advisors avail-

able for an online discussion. Dealing with this newly independent collective was frustrating for many staffers, who saw this organizing as distracting supporters from their electoral work. Yet, there was also the acknowledgment that the very tools the campaign deployed and leveraged to get supporters involved had also facilitated this independent supporter action.

In the end, the moment passed and the campaign's response defused the Get FISA Right collective. While there are a number of interpretations of these events, on one level they reveal how the collective had agency vis-a-vis the campaign, much more so than the silent crowd. On another level, however, it reveals the limited degree to which supporters had a voice in the legislative platform of the campaign. And, with little in the way of a viable alternative candidate, over time members of the collective again came to accept the terms of participation and melted back into the crowd.

CONCLUSION

Crowds work towards ends defined by the organizations that convene and gather them as long as the goals for collective action are generally aligned and tasks are rewarding and meaningful. In these routine times, the crowd actively consents to its work being directed towards particular ends; indeed, there is always preexisting mobilization that calls it into existence. The Obama campaign used networked tools to provide its crowd with shape and direction, an arrangement that was remarkably stable for much of the election given the desire to defeat Obama's opponents and the coordinating work of staffers. This alignment and stability was a social and technical accomplishment that had to be realized daily.

The crowd always has latent agency, the potential to develop an autonomous sense of itself and act independently. When goal alignment breaks down members of the

crowd can fashion themselves into a collective. This became clear the moment Obama shifted his stance on FISA, as individuals frustrated by the candidate's opportunism sought to act towards non-defined purposes and ends. Networked technologies played a central role in supporting the constitution of this collective and providing it with the capacity to act on a significant scale. In this context, networked tools provided places for activists to gather, create a shared identity, and take action against the campaign based on their grievances. The campaign's own flexible tools helped this collective scale rapidly and take symbolic and social action that attracted press attention, garnered resources, and ultimately forced a response from the campaign. This response, however, reflected the electoral context. The collective knew that exiting the Obama effort would contribute to McCain's candidacy. After eight years of Bush, Obama's supporters were not about to derail the campaign. Staffers ultimately knew that the collective had little bargaining power, and there was little risk in the candidate's minimal response. □

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