

THESIS

USHERING IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY ON CYBER WAVES OF
CHANGE? THE POSSIBILITIES OF AN INTERACTIVE WHITE HOUSE

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY AMANDA LYNN PURNELL ENTITLED USHERING IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY ON CYBER WAVES OF CHANGE? THE POSSIBILITIES OF AN INTERACTIVE WHITE HOUSE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

USHERING IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY ON CYBER WAVES OF CHANGE? THE POSSIBILITIES OF AN INTERACTIVE WHITE HOUSE

This thesis seeks to understand in what ways the Obama administration uses web-based technologies to fulfill key campaign promises for transparency and participation, as well as how those strategies may foster participatory democracy. To answer these questions, the thesis engages conversations of interactivity, interpellation, participatory democracy and the role the net generation plays in the future of participatory democracy in the United States. The project considers two key features of WhiteHouse.gov—the Briefing Room and the Blog—as well as the administration’s online presence on Facebook through their White House Live feature.

It concludes that the administration is fulfilling most of their campaign promises, but not all of those promises have the capacity to promote participatory democracy. The American public has more access to their government, and to information, but has little actual influence in everyday governing. This thesis also suggests that the Obama administration is putting forth a new understanding of American citizenship that interpellates an active citizen. The characteristics the administration attributes to this active citizen align with the characteristics attributed to members of the net generation. The implications of these findings and the barriers to participatory democracy are

discussed as the project concludes by considering the future of politics in the United States.

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Chapter One

Wireless Web of Change

Two of the most significant factors in the 2008 presidential election both came to America courtesy of the turbulent 1960s. Those two factors are Barack Obama and the Internet. Originally invented in 1969 to connect computer networks for defense purposes (Davis, 1999), the Internet has expanded to test the limits of all human communication, but, until recently, its full potential has only been the hint of a suggestion. The Internet had become the connection between family members separated by distance, the instant encyclopedia, the source for the purchase of every whim, the quick way to connect with fellow students, the classifieds—everything except for the people's connection to their candidate or politician. Forty years after the Internet emerged from the minds of defense department engineers, the Web had neglected to embed itself fully in the most recognizable home in the country: the White House. In order for the Internet to overcome this remaining obstacle, the Web would need a little help from the president himself.

An underdog candidate. The first bi-racial president. The first president with an African father. Milestones achieved with the election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land abound. Each seems to symbolize how far our nation has come. It is entirely possible that Obama's legacy was sealed simply with his election. A bi-racial president is an achievement decades in the making, but everything about his campaign suggests Obama does not want this to be his legacy. His campaign suggests a steady gaze on the future, a secure future of strength and the classic American spirit. A digital future.

Among the features that are significant to the 44th president of the United States is a strong push for the use of digital innovation in all aspects of government, but most especially along the lines of communication between the American people and their elected officials. As promised by his campaign, his efforts to bring e-democracy could be his legacy. However, promises are unimpressive unless they are fulfilled. Empty promises symbolize politics as usual in Washington. This project will explore the use of web-based technology by the Obama administration, particularly toward the fulfillment of campaign promises, and what it means for participatory democracy in the United States.

Digitizing Americans and Their Government

The 2008 presidential election suggests that a new spark of interest has been ignited among the American people. Shabazz (2008) reports acceptance speeches for both the Republican and Democrat National Conventions were viewed by nearly 40 million people, “more than the number of people according to MSNBC who watched this year’s Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing, the American Idol finals, or the Academy Awards. This close attention says two things: people are engaged and they want to know about the issues and the candidates” (p. 239). This renewed interest certainly impacted the outcome of the 2008 election, but in conjunction with two other factors, this renewed interest could mean much more for the future of American politics. With the proper application of participatory, web-based technologies and a president who embraces those technologies, the re-engagement of the American citizenry could mean even bigger changes are in store than the nation has seen thus far. These changes could move

technology's impact on politics beyond campaigning and into the realm of everyday governing.

E-democracy, as defined by the Hansard Society of the United Kingdom, "is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies" (qtd. in Chadwick, 2006, p. 84). Others, like Hacker and van Dijk (2000), have termed the concept *digital democracy* and define it as "a collection of attempts to practise [sic] democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using information and communications technology or computer-mediated communication instead, as an addition, not a replacement, for traditional 'analogue' political practices" (p. 1). Excited chatter over the Internet's possibilities has been growing steadily louder for over a decade, but for those on the optimistic end of the spectrum, things are finally starting to get interesting. Among the oversized expectations heaped on the daily-expanding World Wide Web are: increased availability of governmental information to citizens; elected officials who are more accessible; and, possibly the most intimidating of all, the ability to engage a nation of youth, utterly disheartened with the everyday workings of the political world, through the Internet's interactivity.

American youth voting records have been dismal and dropping for decades. McGregor (2000) reports that in 1972, the first year that the voting age was lowered to 18 from 21, 50 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 went to the polls to cast a ballot. However, after they re-elected Richard Nixon to office in 1972, the percentage of voters in this age group continually dropped and, by 1996, the percentage of voters ages 18-24 was only 32 percent.

McGregor (2000) also reports that many who fall into this age group are disinterested in voting because they do not feel as if their interests are being considered by those whose names are listed on their ballots. A telephone survey of 806 young people conducted by the nonprofit group Youth in Action in conjunction with Oregon State University, showed that “More than 90 percent of 16- to 25- year-olds believe more people would vote if candidates addressed issues they care about” (McGregor, 2000, p. 1E). Young people’s disinterest with political participation is unfortunate as Sherece Brown-Gray, a coordinator with the League of Women Voters’ Educational Fund, explains, “Young people are a very powerful group, just in terms of numbers. They could be the swing vote . . . They could be the group that ultimately determines who the president will be” (qtd. in McGregor, 2000, p. 1E). In order to claim this voting block, however, the presidential candidate would have to know how to talk to America’s youth and what to talk to them about.

As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Barack Obama was the candidate who would capture the hearts of the net generation, who Tapscott (2009) identifies as anyone born between the years 1977 and 1997, and embody their social networking spirit within his campaign. In order to understand the intentions that Barack Obama has for the Internet in his White House, I will trace the impact of Obama’s campaign on the election process through his strategy that motivated a grassroots movement among his supporters, as well as his impact, specifically on the youngest generation of voting Americans. Next, I will detail the promises that emerged from the campaign trail in reference to government transparency and an informed, participation-oriented public. In order to truly understand Obama’s use of technology, I will need to understand his ideal audience, so I

will explore the newest generation of American voters and the ways in which they use the Internet on a regular basis. This chapter will then outline the means through which I intend to analyze the Obama administration's employment of web-based technologies for the benefit of participatory democracy. Before I look to the future prospects of the relationship between the Internet and politics, however, I will first briefly trace the scholarship that debates whether or not the Internet can have any lasting effects on the political process.

The Debate over the Internet's Potential

For years now scholars have proffered their expert opinions of what the Internet is and where it might be taking us. Davis (1999) asserts that "The Web is not a virtual community; it is a collection of isolated individuals" (p. 177). But this collides with Gitlin's (2002) observation that media of communication are now commonly used to create a sense of immediacy between two entities that are separated by distance. The difference between the two claims probably has something to do with the changing nature of the Internet. The Internet that first invaded our lives and the Internet that has intricately woven itself throughout society today are two distinct entities. Tapscott (2009) writes, "The old Web was something you surfed for content. The new Web is a communications medium that enables people to create their own content, collaborate with others, and build communities" (p. 18). The old web was used in similar ways to the predominant media of the time (television and radio) to disseminate information—to broadcast. The new web is characterized by interactivity and production on the part of those who would have otherwise simply been filling the role of consumers.

Old or new, many scholars still cannot agree on whether or not the Internet can bring about fundamental change in the way politics is conducted in the United States. I will spend the next few pages reviewing this conversation over the Internet's potential.

The Fast Track to Participatory Democracy

Most scholars agree that the two most important possibilities the Internet brings to politics are increased access to information and greater opportunity to interact with the government and its officials (Norris, 2001; Bentivegna 2002; Van Dijk, 2006; Weinberger 2007). Rafaeli (1988) defines interactivity as “an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (p. 111). Essentially, interactivity requires that “communication roles [are] interchangeable” and that responses within a conversation do more than simply respond to the previous statement (Rafaeli, 1988, p. 111). Participants in the conversation must actively engage responses offered earlier in the conversation. So, equipping the public with information, and providing them with additional ways to contact their elected officials increases the chances of effective political interaction. Warnick (2007) demonstrates the ways in which interactivity has already been made available during online campaigning.¹ Bentivegna (2002) believes the presence of interactivity in terms of both information and participation could be an avenue for the members of the public to establish their authority as citizens in everyday governing as well. van Dijk (2006) agrees, saying, “institutional political forces have to give up some of their powers” as others, like individual citizens, begin to make demands based on personal needs (p. 100). Hacker suggests this approach to democracy is supported by the notion that “government

¹ A more thorough discussion of Warnick's types of interactivity will be taken up in chapter 2.

works best when there is an active and continual interaction between those who govern and those who are governed” (qtd. in Bentivenga, 2002, p. 55).

Davis (1999) says that the Internet fundamentally promises “an increase in information readily available to the average citizen, and more individual control over what information is received” (p. 21). This two-fold promise could lead to “a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry” (Corrado qtd. in Davis, 1999, p. 21). Davis (1999) reports that the information available online in 1999 included “data on PAC contributions to candidates for federal office; the voting records of individual members of Congress; the full texts of legislation, executive agreements, treaties, and speeches; transcripts of press conferences, and on and on” (p. 22). All of this knowledge that can now be accessed via public websites without having to leave home, makes it easier for citizens to educate themselves.

Weinberger (2007) defends the potential of knowledge that could be shared through online networking, writing “it is the wisdom of groups, employing *social expertise*, by which the connections among people help guide what the group learns and knows” (p. 131). Most Internet users are already using collaborative technology without any prodding. Over 12 million people have user accounts with Wikipedia alone (Wikipedians, 2010). As Weinberger (2007) explains, “Customers, patrons, users,—and citizens are not waiting for permission to take control of finding and organizing information. And we’re doing it not just as individuals. Knowledge—its content and its organization—is becoming a social act” (p. 133). In our newly networked society, “The knowledge exists between the contributors. It is knowledge that has no knowers. Social knowing changes *who* does the knowing and *how*, more than it changes the *what* of

knowledge” (Wienberger, 2007, pp. 143-144). All of this is of great advantage to the general public as Weinberger (2007) explains, “One of the lessons of Wikipedia is that conversation improves expertise by exposing weaknesses, introducing new viewpoints, and pushing ideas into accessible form” (p. 145). All of these things, it is hoped, produce greater understanding and, potentially, new knowledge among the public.

The Internet has distinguished itself in one significant way from previous media advancements; the Internet “erases the distinctions between communication transmitter and receiver. . . . The term ‘self-publishing’ has acquired a new meaning as users create webpages with their own individual statements—social, religious, economic or even political” (Davis, 1999, p. 35). Norris (2001) adds, “Compared with radio, television, and newspapers, controlled by editors and broadcasters, the World Wide Web facilitates a virtually unlimited choice of information and communication . . . with a minimal role for gatekeepers or government censors” (p. 232). This is the distinction that could preserve the Internet’s potential to give all Americans a voice.

Everything is Changing . . . or Nothing is Changing

Not everyone is equally optimistic about the Internet’s potential. In 1982 Nick Danziger questioned the path that lay ahead for digital democracy. Danziger believed “computing will *reinforce* the power and influence of those actors and groups who already have the most resources and power in the organization” (qtd. in Chadwick, 2006, p. 201). Postman (1992), too, was concerned that the Internet was simply one more way for the masses to be secured under the thumb of the government or big business. He wrote, “Their private matters have been made more accessible to powerful institutions. They are more easily tracked and controlled, are subjected to more examinations; are

increasingly mystified by the decisions made about them; are often reduced to mere numerical objects” (Postman, 1992, p. 10). Postman (1992) asked “to whom will the technology give greater power and freedom? And whose power and freedom will be reduced by it?” (p. 11).

Davis (1999) critiqued the potential influence of the Internet by examining the impact affected by previous new media that were expected to revolutionize politics. Radio, television and cable television all emerged with the potential to change politics, but in each case they succeeded only in becoming one more mechanism with which the usual suspects could maintain their established roles in the political structure. Government continued to disseminate information through the news media and special interests continued to lobby government based on their own concerns. Davis (1999) added that proponents of the digital political revolution have been wrong in making two assumptions about American politics; “Predictions of Internet driven democracy assume not only that ordinary individuals are anxious to participate (a dubious claim), but also that policy makers want to listen” (pp. 177-178). Davis (1999) also believed that in order for the Internet to have any real impact on politics, the citizens using the Internet would have to actively seek out information and provide their own commentary in response to political developments, which he did not believe could happen.

More recently, scholars do not hesitate to point out that the Internet could just as easily be used as another broadcast medium rather than a tool for change. There is a concern that websites will be used solely for image construction on the part of politicians, rather than democracy construction involving citizens (Davis 1999; Norris, 2001; Chadwick, 2006; van Dijk, 2006; Hindman, 2009). The Internet could also simply serve

as another organizing tool for those already politically active without drawing any new citizens into the mix. Norris (2001) reports, “Studies of the social and political characteristics of Internet activists in the 1996 and 1998 American elections, based on Pew Surveys of online users and the general public, [report] an overall pattern of reinforcement rather than mobilization” (p. 218). It is important to note that “large-scale Internet activity in online forums, polls, communities and pressure groups is able to flourish without any influence on decision-making in official politics” (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 107-108). As van Dijk (2006) suggests, just because members of the public are talking in the digital world does not mean that their conversations will have any effect on earthly politics.

Against these odds, Obama’s ability to initiate any kind of lasting change in the way the nation approaches everyday politics by using the Internet seems improbable at best. However, a post-election survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that the American people are optimistic that the Obama administration will be more engaged with the public. Smith (2008) reports “Fully 51% of online Obama supporters expect some kind of ongoing communication from the new administration” (p. 1). Those surveyed indicate that they expect Obama to continue to communicate with them using such technology as email, social networking sites and text messages. So, why are these Americans optimistic about the engagement they will find with an Obama White House?

Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign: The Poster Child for Web-Based Technological Triumph

To date, much of the focus of the Internet's influence over the political world has been of its impact on political campaigning. Chadwick's (2006) explanation of how the Internet could potentially diffuse power during an election, now sounds more like a summary of Obama's campaign than a prophecy. The argument says that the Internet encourages

new, participatory campaigns featuring larger memberships operating in decentralized, horizontal network structures that depart from the hierarchical structure typical of the catch-all party. Continuous interaction between candidates and their supporters will enhance democratic control by the grass roots, it is claimed, serving to undermine recent trends toward elitism. Candidates will tailor their programs to voters' interests in much more refined ways and will 'narrowcast' messages to discrete groups in the electorate. These forces will diffuse out into the broader party system as citizens become more adept at monitoring campaigns. Groups of grassroots activists will be empowered to make strategic interventions at decisive moments in the campaign, such as organizing quickfire donation drives. . . . (Chadwick, 2006, pp. 148-149)

These rosy predictions by Chadwick (2006) must have sounded quite idealistic two years before Obama was elected to office.

From day one, the Internet was a central part of Obama's game plan. Blue State Digital, the company who designed the president's campaign webpage, had My.BarackObama.com ready for visitors by the time Obama officially announced his

candidacy (Learmonth, 2009). By the time Obama was elected to office, his campaign listed among its accomplishments “\$500 million raised online from 3 million donors, most in increments of less than \$100; 35,000 groups organized through the website My Barack Obama; 1,800 videos posted to YouTube, garnering 50 million views; and Facebook’s most popular page, with gagillions of friends” (Learmonth, 2009, p. 16). All of those videos, all of the friends, all of the donations certainly provided fuel to the campaign, but some journalists speculate that “the most powerful tool in Obama’s digital arsenal was probably his 13.5 million-strong e-mail list” (Learmonth, 2009, p. 16). Obama supporters were encouraged to add their email addresses to region and issue specific lists that were provided at campaign events (Tapscott, 2009). By signing up, these supporters could easily receive updates on the latest election information specific to their area. How is it, exactly, that Obama was able to attract so many people to him, get them to willingly hand over their email addresses—or in some cases phone numbers—entice them to donate to his campaign, and even organize on his behalf?

Fundamentally, Obama’s campaign was intriguing to the American public because it was “immersed in his audience’s experience” (Shiffman, 2008, p. 36). He took his campaign to the public by appealing to them where they were already spending most of their time—online.² He also laid out a clear campaign message, which allowed supporters to organize campaign events around his message without any official campaign members. Garment (2008) claims that Obama’s campaign depicted a “well-organized grassroots effort with first-hand knowledge of the political climate and voting protocol in each state and the expertise to resonate with local communities. The collective skills of these local partners helped the ‘Obama brand’ connect with its audience and

² According to Paris (2008, May), Americans spent almost 28 hours a month online in 2008.

raise capital in record proportions” (p. 15). So, Obama’s supporters on the ground were every bit as important as they would have been in any previous election year, but the Internet allowed them to organize more effectively, as intended by campaign staffers. Chris Hughes, co-founder of Facebook and an Obama campaign member, explains, “Our guiding philosophy was to build online tools to help people self-organize and then get out of their way . . . The technology was more a means of empowering people to do what they were interested in doing in the first place” (qtd. in Learmonth, 2009, p. 16).

Obama certainly has charisma, and he was able to make voters feel as though they knew him personally by incorporating campaign videos where he spoke to viewers as if it were only the two of them having a conversation (Shiffman, 2008). However, the presence of a politician with charisma was certainly not the reason this campaign seemed so different. The difference lay in the fact that Obama led a campaign that allowed for two-way communication rather than the one-way dissemination of information that has historically marked political campaigning. His online presence brought “downloadable widgets, logo buttons, videos and posters, as well as wallpaper and cellphone ringtones” (Shiffman, 2008, p. 36), but these offerings were superfluous compared to the vast new opportunities he provided for Americans to speak to him or their fellow citizens about the campaign and the issues. Throughout the campaign he stressed the “we” in “Yes we can!” always reminding his supporters that he believed their opinions were just as important as his. Obama gave the American people the opportunity to make his campaign about what *they* needed rather than solely about *his* aspirations. The emails and text messages sent in mass quantities gave people the impression that this was their campaign as well. They were led to feel as though they were actually a part of Obama’s inner circle.

Obama underscored the foundational belief that drove his campaign when he said, “Technology empowers people to come together to [drive] change . . . We have to do more than get our house in order; the opportunity in front of us is bigger than that. Seizing this opportunity is going to depend on more than what the government does and even more than what the technology sector does” (qtd. in Koons, 2008, p. 13). The predominant themes promoted by his campaign demonstrated that Obama wanted the American people to engage both him, and each other to help solve the nation’s problems, but he also made specific declarations about the government’s role in increasing transparency, access and participation under his direction.

Promises, Promises

A survey conducted by Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio University before the 2008 presidential election, found that “90 percent of the 1,012 respondents surveyed think it’s important for candidates to say where they stand on open government issues” (Koons, 2008, p. 11). The same survey “found a significant increase over the past three years in the percentage of Americans who believe the federal government is very or somewhat secretive, from 62 percent of those surveyed in 2006 to 74 percent in 2008” (Koons, 2008, p. 11). The Obama campaign, seemingly, agreed. His campaign, not unlike all other presidential campaigns, was filled with promises. Among the most notable of those promises were the ones he made on the subject of government transparency.

On Transparency

Obama for America (2008) promised “On his first day as President, Barack Obama will launch the most sweeping ethics reform in history to make the White House the people’s house” (p. 16). It is difficult to imagine that a building as highly guarded as

the White House could be open enough to be considered the “people’s house,” but the promise was made and the nation waited, not exactly quietly, for results. If the White House was going to be the “people’s house” then the people should probably know who was coming and going from the premises. Obama promised to “ensure that communications about regulatory policymaking between persons outside government and all White House staff are disclosed to the public” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 152). He also promised to void the previous administration’s executive order that allowed presidential records to remain undisclosed to the public.

Additionally, Obama said he would “require his appointees who lead the executive branch departments and rule-making agencies to conduct the significant business of the agency in public so that any citizen can see in person or watch on the Internet as the agencies debate and deliberate the issues that affect American society” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 152). Not only would this business be conducted in public view, but it would also be available in video and transcript form for those unable to watch the proceedings as they unfold (Obama for America, 2008). Obama also made promises based on the premise that the American people should know how the government is spending their money. Therefore, he suggested that the government “Give the public five days to review all nonemergency bills before they are signed into law, and not attach signing statements that undermine legislative intent” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 151), thus giving the people a chance to read legislation completely untwisted and untainted by political spin.

On Access and Participation

Incorporating digital technology into everyday governing is about more than “simply increasing the amount of political information available to citizens” (Chadwick, 2006, p. 104). The Obama campaign seemed to agree as Americans were promised a voice, and even more importantly someone who would listen; “In our democracy, the price of access and influence should be nothing more than your voice and your vote. It’s time to renew our politics in this country—to ensure that the hopes and concerns of average Americans speak louder in Washington than the hallway whispers of high-priced lobbyists” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 147). In addition to conducting business in public view, Obama would also require “his Cabinet officials to have periodic national broadband town hall meetings—twenty-first-century fireside chats—to discuss issues before their agencies” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 152). This would give average Americans a chance to get their questions answered earlier in the lawmaking process.

After losing the New Hampshire Democratic Primary to then Senator Hillary Clinton, Obama took the stage to talk about what would need to be done after the election “the reason our campaign has always been different is because it’s not just about what I will do as President, it’s also about what you, the people who love this country, can do to change it” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 211). Americans would be routinely asked to serve their country in various capacities including through the “America’s Voice Initiative within the State Department to rapidly recruit and train Americans who are fluent speakers of local languages (Arabic, Bahasa, Farsi, Urdu, and Turkish) in public diplomacy skills” (Obama for America, 2008, pp. 155-156). These Americans would be relied on to represent America and American interests in these parts of the world. In order

to make volunteering more accessible to the American people, the Obama campaign promised the creation of a website that would be “comprehensive, easily searchable” and effective in coordinating a volunteer with an organization or action that was in need of their efforts (Obama for America, 2008, p. 157).

In order to facilitate this more efficient and effective exchange of information between the people and their president, Obama’s plan included the appointment of “the nation’s first Chief Technology Officer (CTO)” who would “ensure the safety of our networks and [would] lead an interagency effort, working with chief technology and chief information officers of each of the federal agencies to ensure that they use best-in-class technologies and share best practices” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 88).

Figure 1.1. Obama's Campaign Promises

| |
|--|
| <p><i>Transparency Promises</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclose the names of those interacting with the White House. • Revoke Executive Order 13233 which further restricted access to presidential records. • Post pending legislation for five days for public comment before it is signed into law. • Conduct business before the public. |
| <p><i>Access & Participation Promises</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it easier for Americans to effectively volunteer their time in their communities. • Create the America’s Voice Initiative to pursue avenues of foreign diplomacy. • Conduct national broadband town hall meetings on a regular basis. |

His promises suggested that Obama intended not only to change the nature of campaigning, but the nature of politics as well. One of the most significant things Obama could do to distinguish his presidency from most other presidencies (other than his adoption of digital media) was to actually keep those promises he made during the campaign. Obama himself made a similar statement on February 10, 2007 when he officially declared his intentions to run for President. In his speech he said, “every four

years, candidates from both parties make similar promises, and I expect this year will be no different. . . . But too many times, after the election is over, and the confetti is swept away, all those promises fade from memory, and the lobbyists and the special interest move in, and people turn away, disappointed as before, left to struggle on their own” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 200). In order for the nation to feel as though its new president was serious about the promises he made during the campaign, the lines of communication between the White House and the American public would have to be much wider, and would need to move at a greater speed. Now I ask, who will be the Americans offering their voices to the president—will the net generation continue their partnership with Obama? And is this group of Americans, due to their proficiency with technology, uniquely suited to respond to any invitations from the White House to engage?

The Nation’s First Networked Generation—Obama’s Ideal Audience

The members of the net generation who would have been of voting age in 2008 accounted for voters between the ages of 18 and 31. Tapscott (2009) asserts, “As the first global generation ever, the Net Geners are smarter, quicker, and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors. They care strongly about justice and the problems faced by their society and are typically engaged in some kind of civic activity at school, at work, or in their communities” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 6). However, this does not mean that they will engage without a little prodding. Director of survey research for the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Scott Keeter, provides some insight into the minds of young America, saying, “We do know [that] young people need to be mobilized . . . They don’t have habits. They don’t have experience voting. They need to be asked”

(qtd. in Skalka, 2008, p. 5). Obama asked, and he received; Holmes (2008) reports that participation in 2008 Democratic primaries by voters under 30 was up 170% from 2004, and Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg (2009) report that over 2 million more votes were cast in the 2008 general election by Americans ages 18 to 29 than in 2004. Thornton (2008/2009) calls the 2008 election “a perfect collision of technology with a generation ready to rise up and embrace a cause” (p. 2). I would add to Thornton’s assessment a candidate willing to embrace the generation’s efforts. With these three strategic factors—technology, a motivated generation and a politician in tune to the generation’s motivations—Bill Moyers believed a change in the nature of democracy was likely, because the election had sparked “the most significant citizens’ movement to emerge in this century” (qtd. in Editorial, 2009, p. 2).

Rupert Murdoch offers a unique insight into the way many young Americans feel, saying, “Young people don’t want to rely on a Godlike figure from above to tell them what’s important. . . . They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it” (Anderson qtd. in Winograd & Hais, 2008, p. 152). In short, young people demand control and with “social networking tools, each voter [could] become his or her own campaign office and flood the nation’s political speech with unfiltered ideas from every corner of the country” (Winograd & Hais, 2008, p. 153). Young Americans love to consume media, but they also want to be a part of media production, making them *prosumers* who contribute to the output of media as eagerly as they consume it (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Skeptics, however, believe that young people are too caught up in the virtual reality they create online to care about, or even acknowledge, the real world problems piling up around them. These skeptics are not considering that

The Internet provides citizens with opportunities to organize their offline engagement in campaigns through physical attendance at rallies and fund-raising events, but it also provides a potentially rich number of online political behaviors: email, discussion forums, and instant messaging. The key point in this perspective is that the distinction between being a citizen offline and being one online has started to dissolve. (Chadwick, 2006, p. 172)

This is precisely the panoramic view that emerged from the campaign trail. Young supporters regularly used their web connections to build and maintain relationships with other supporters, which enabled the organization of local, meaningful campaign events with or without the candidate in attendance.

The truth is that these young Americans can actually use their Internet interests to teach the nation how to better connect, both locally and on a national scale. As proven in the 2008 presidential election, young Americans care about the fate of the nation and they know how to use their unique skill set to collaborate. Social networking is no longer about gathering information on our friends, but, rather, about collaborating to produce. Networkers are producing change, solutions, community, and even personal accomplishments such as artwork, but no matter what the product, “Social networking is becoming social production” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 211). It is the college students in particular who are demonstrating how “social networking gives them extraordinary power to work outside the boundaries of political establishments” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 61).

Tapscott (2009) predicts that the Net Geners' performance in this past presidential election will not be a onetime occurrence. If Tapscott is right, the net generation will be important to Obama throughout his term in office. They know how to make social networking work for them and will be the ideal audience for any attempts made at integrating interactive web technology into the everyday workings of the White House. Tapscott (2009) writes, "They won't settle for a passive role in politics or in the government. They are already placing demands on our political institutions in order to engage them. I believe they will insist on changes to the way governments are run, too. . . . Broadcast democracy was fine for the TV generation. Not for them" (p. 37). The Net Generation's resistance to politics as usual does more than just question authority; it suggests that scholars should also be asking what the consequences have been for the broadcast approach to democracy in America.

Reflecting on Democracy and the Internet

Characterizing democracy prior to any serious relationship between politics and the Internet, Tapscott (2009) writes,

Almost all democratic systems around the world are best described as "broadcast democracies." Politicians in capital cities use the media to broadcast their opinions to citizens, and in the run-up to the election, they buttress these messages with paid advertising. Then the citizens get their one shot at participating in the governing process, i.e., they vote. After the ballots are cast, voters go back to their passive role as recipients of political messages. Between elections there is no real engagement by the citizens in the important decisions that affect their lives. (p. 259)

Even the language used to talk about government in the United States relays the nation's approach to democracy. Tapscott (2009) writes, "When it comes to democracy we describe citizens as 'the electorate,' 'voters,' and 'electors.' In doing so we reduce citizens to people who execute transactions in a voting booth every two or four years. Surely citizens could be involved more deeply in the political life of their country, to the benefit of all" (p. 261).

Hauser (1987) makes a similar observation, but draws a distinction between audiences and publics. Audiences, he explains, are submissive. Audiences "are asked to purchase and applaud. Publics, on the other hand, are presumed to have a guiding interest that gives them the potential to become active; they are asked their opinions" (p. 440). Americans have been duped into believing they are part of a great public, when really they act as an audience seated before a grand production. According to Tapscott (2009), the United States is failing to use one of its most valuable resources: its own citizens. He writes, "What the current system lacks are mechanisms enabling government to benefit on an ongoing basis from the wisdom and insight that a nation can collectively offer" (Tapscott, 2009, p. 260).

Postman (1992) suggests, "A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything" (p. 18). He recognizes the powerful nature of developing technologies in that they do not simply provide additional methods of interaction, but, rather, alter the way we interact on the whole. Postman (1992) continues, "New technologies alter the structure of our interests, the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop" (p. 20). The communication structure

that has actively engaged Net Geners encourages networking over broadcasting, placing “all power in the hands of the user” (Winograd & Hais, 2008, p. 141). This communication structure could also provide the opportunity for the country to discover its collective wisdom by using the knowledge of the vast perspectives of its citizens to inform the government’s policy-making. By employing the Internet, “Citizens are able to be citizens, not just consumers, in their interactions with departments and agencies and are thus able to augment the tasks of scrutiny and accountability performed by legislatures. Much of this depends, however, upon the levels of interactivity provided by government websites” (Hacker qtd. in Chadwick, 2006, p. 197). In order for citizens to become more than just consumers, government sites will need to move beyond the precedence set during the previous two administrations.

Early in his first term in office, Bill Clinton established a White House Director for E-mail and Electronic Publishing. Not long after, the White House found itself hosting its first website. It entered cyberspace in 1993 and offered information in the form of press releases, as well as more image related materials such as a first family scrapbook or the ability to “tour” the White House. Of the executive branches first foray into life online, Davis (1999) writes, “media analysts Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman conclude that ‘the promise of access was fulfilled, but with little relationship to democratic governance’” (p. 137). The first White House website was found to be entirely self-serving rather than constituent engaging.

President George W. Bush’s White House website listed two options for interaction. The first was an “Ask the White House” series that provided the opportunity for individuals to pose questions to administration officials during live chats. Travers

(2009) writes that while these live chats took place during the Bush administration, President Bush himself was never a part of them. The second option was called “White House Interactive,” and it provided the opportunity for individuals to submit questions electronically and different administration officials would respond in text on the website. Of the seven questions answered in 2006 and 2007, five were cosmetic questions like, “Who chooses the order of the cabinet Members that sit next to the President during Cabinet Meetings?” and only two were questions about issues (White House Interactive, n. d.). As his term unfolds, the nation waits to see if Obama can build on these preliminary uses of the Internet to fully utilize the potential of the Web. The powerful grassroots work accomplished during his campaign has much of the nation hoping he will be answering more than six citizen inquiries about the actions of his White House over the course of a year in office.

It has taken some time for politicians and citizens alike to warm up to the possibilities of the Internet for political campaigning and political activism, but the nation has begun to see the possibilities the Internet holds coming to fruition. We no longer have to wonder what digital media can do to the idea of political campaigning, but these next couple of years will be crucial for discovering what the Internet can do for organizing citizens on behalf of everyday governing. They will also be crucial to discovering if digital media can have an impact on what it means to be an American citizen, shifting the meaning from someone who votes on Election Day to someone who is politically engaged year-round.

A New Beginning for Participatory Democracy

As the first American president to truly embrace the potential of the Internet, Obama's years in office could critically influence any relationship between politics and the Net. I wish to initiate a conversation addressing the Internet's impact on a contemporary understanding of participatory democracy.³ This project explores the rhetorical implications of a technologically savvy White House by asking two questions. First, what web-based technologies are the Obama administration using to fulfill their campaign promises? Second, to what extent, if at all, do they foster participatory democracy?

The nature of the Internet makes it more difficult than other texts to analyze in order to answer these questions. Brummet (2006) helps us understand how to approach modern texts like these. Brummet (2006) explains that there are discrete texts which have "clear boundaries in time and space" and then there are diffuse texts, like websites, whose borders are blurred and often "mixed up with other signs" (p. 106). Because of the diffuse nature of some texts, and the texts for this project in particular, the critic must determine where their text begins and ends. This project examines a series of opportunities to engage the Obama administration online. I have chosen these experiences based directly on the promises that Obama made during the campaign.

Chapter two is dedicated to analyzing the official White House website, WhiteHouse.gov. My analysis first and foremost seeks to understand how if at all WhiteHouse.gov promotes a more participatory democracy. Previous discussions of participatory democracy, such as that by Cook and Morgan (1971) and Pateman (1970),

³ For additional conversations on participation in government during the Obama administration, see the January 2010 issue of the *International Association for Public Participation*, 4(1). The issue is a special edition titled "Obama Administration and Public Participation."

have defined participatory democracy as increasing the public's authority in decision-making. However, I find that this definition is inadequate for the spirit of this contemporary moment. This definition encourages a shift towards direct democracy rather than enhancing the nation's existing representative democracy. I put forth an understanding of participatory democracy not of changing the form of decision-making, but in allowing more voices to inform the deliberation that precedes decision-making, and holding the public's representatives accountable for those decisions. This characterization of participatory democracy is deeply rooted in Abraham Lincoln's understanding of the United States government as "of the people, by the people, for the people," (Library of Congress, 2005) in that the voices of the people are driving governing (of the people), the public is electing their representatives (by the people), and the public can ensure that they are actually being represented (for the people). In chapter two, I assess how the Obama administration's use of web-based technology through WhiteHouse.gov supports, contradicts, or even moves beyond this understanding of participatory democracy.

Chapter two further explores the contemporary notion of participatory democracy as well as how to identify participatory democracy in an online text. A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to considering the fulfillment of transparency promises by the Obama administration. In an effort to understand who the site is targeting, I also employ Althusser's notion of hailing to discover who is being hailed by WhiteHouse.gov. Because the Internet is an ever-changing text, I captured screenshots of the website in order to study the experiences being offered on the site in-depth. The screen shots captured reflect what any user would have found if they had

visited the site on January 17, 2010. This date was chosen randomly. In one sitting I navigated through the site, recording the content that was available at that time.

Approaching the collection of data in this way mimics the experiences had by a visitor if they happened to navigate to WhiteHouse.gov on a given day.

Chapter three analyzes the White House Live feature, primarily as it functions on the White House Live Facebook app. The White House Live feature streams live video of speeches, press conferences and forums. The president's online forums are places where the public has been encouraged to establish contact with the president or members of his administration, be it direct or mediated. I captured a live forum using CamStudio software that allows the user to record what is happening on their computer screen. This allowed me to record comments being posted directly to the Facebook app by those participating in the forum, as well as the video of the administration officials giving their responses. The forum I analyzed lasted approximately 50 minutes and was held on January 27, 2010 following the President's State of the Union address. The forum gave members of the public the opportunity to pose questions concerning the content of the President's speech to a panel of three White House representatives. I considered how well this experience provided by the White House aligns with participatory democracy by considering both the exchanges between White House officials and public participants, as well as exchanges between the participants themselves.

I also sought to understand how well these texts met the eight characteristics typical of Obama's ideal audience—the net generation. The youngest generation of Americans “prize freedom and freedom of choice. They want to customize things, make them their own. They're natural collaborators, who enjoy a conversation, not a lecture.

They'll scrutinize you and your organization. They insist on integrity. They want to have fun, even at work and at school. Speed is normal. Innovation is part of life" (Tapscott, 2009, pp. 6-7). Obama's online efforts will be compromised if they are not frequented by an online generation. In this chapter, I sought to discover if Obama's use of online technology aligns with the expectations of young Americans as well as whether or not those expectations align with the characteristics of a participatory democracy.

The final chapter concludes this project by summarizing the findings of the analysis and discussing a continued relationship between web-based technologies and participatory democracy. Additionally, I reflect on the limitations of this research project in order to suggest possible avenues for future research.

Chapter Two

The White House Online

I began my search for participatory democracy at the gateway to the White House online—WhiteHouse.gov. I focused my search in part on the promises made to the American public during Obama’s campaign for President, and, in part, on the sections of the website the administration emphasized from the beginning—the Briefing Room and the Blog. The former allows me to identify the experiences offered on the website that seem to be attempting to fulfill those campaign promises and then consider their impact on participatory democracy. The latter is equally important because considering the experiences the White House emphasizes the most speaks to the types of interactions that the administration expects their web visitors to experience.

I approached this analysis of WhiteHouse.gov through several lenses. First, drawing from Gastil (2008), I examine the website in terms of participatory democracy in a 21st century America. Below, I further explain what is required to achieve participatory democracy, as well as how to identify these opportunities in online texts, using Warnick (2007) as my guide. Warnick (2007) lays out four different types of interactivity that can be present in political websites, which I use to understand the level of participatory opportunities present on WhiteHouse.gov. Additionally, a large portion of this chapter focuses on the notion of transparency. Through my analysis of WhiteHouse.gov, I find that the website still functions primarily using interactivity that emphasizes one-way communication. However, I did find more communication coming through this

interactivity in the forms of more information, more voices relaying that information, as well as more options for channels through which to receive that information. Moreover, this communication is less mediated in the sense that citizens can go straight to the White House website to receive this information rather than having the administration transmit the information through the news media that will, necessarily, filter it in some way.

Since the White House is communicating directly to the American public, it is also important to consider how the administration is addressing its online visitors. In particular, I sought to understand how the website hails its visitors as citizens. This chapter finds that WhiteHouse.gov hails its visitors using characteristics previously attributed specifically to the net generation, or, at least, the net generation as it was understood during the presidential campaign of 2008. I explore the implications of this below, in particular, the dilemma of creating a participatory democracy that spans generations. Ultimately, this chapter comes to understand participatory democracy as having different conditions of participation that need to be considered in order to understand its complexity, and suggests that the steps taken thus far within the Obama administration are laying a foundation for participatory democracy in the future.

Identifying Participatory Democracy

Existing research establishes that participatory democracy, in this particular moment in politics, is more appropriately thought of as governing that allows for citizens to directly inform decision making. Participatory democracy also gives its citizens reliable resources with which they can hold their decision-makers accountable. Gastil (2008) helps deepen our understanding of participatory democracy in the 21st century. Gastil (2008) explains that all countries who claim themselves to be democratic nations

are actually “more or less democratic by degrees. The way you can tell them apart is by asking how well a system sizes up when measured by specific criteria: inclusion, effective participation, and enlightened understanding” (p. 5).⁴ Gastil’s (2008) idea of effective participation relies heavily on his last criteria, enlightened understanding. He carefully connects these concepts saying,

Only when members of the public become accustomed to figuring out what’s important will the issues of the day be of consequence. And only when people learn how to study issues and reflect carefully on their values—as well as those of their fellow citizens—will the public become well informed enough to speak, act, and vote in accordance with their enlightened self-interest, let alone for the greater public good. (p. 7)

From Gastil, (2008) we glean that a democracy’s people need to have access to adequate information, and have the capacity to critically consider the information before they can sufficiently engage in the decision-making process. Furthermore, Gastil (2008) emphasizes that this cannot be an elitist process, adding “democracy requires that all people have sufficient opportunities to set the agenda, speak their minds, and complete their ballots” (p. 7).

Gastil (2008) does not entirely ignore the difficulty of providing the means of participation to all citizens in a large nation, writing,

Because a democracy must ensure adequate opportunities to participate, its public must have the capacity to hear from thousands or even millions of fellow citizens at the same time. And because a democracy must cultivate an enlightened

⁴ Gastil adapts these criteria from criteria laid out in Dahl, R. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

understanding of each citizen's interests, it must have a sophisticated means of collecting, processing, and distributing information and experiences among its diverse, large membership. (p. 8)

This passage provides support for the efforts the Obama administration has put forth in emphasizing the need for the means for a great number of people to engage each other in serious conversation. On the one hand, the 21st century has shown us technology that allows for unprecedented interaction with the White House, however, as we will see moving forward through these next chapters, technology continues to limit the exchanges that can be made. The Internet has not magically solved all of our communicatory problems.

The introduction of technology poses other challenges as well. According to Gastil (2008), "Some of this communication infrastructure is inevitably centralized in government agencies, but the bulk of the political speaking, broadcasting, and publishing takes place in private institutions, such as newspapers and nonprofit organizations, and in informal encounters" (p. 8). Gastil (2008) suggests that some of Obama's efforts may be futile because he is attempting to rouse political conversation where it does not typically exist—in interactions between the people and government agencies. However, Obama's efforts may create new communication structures—not present in previous administrations or the public's memory—that could be strengthened overtime. He campaigned on the idea that informal conversations needed to inform the conversations taking place within government agencies to tie the public's interests more closely to their government officials, but does technology allow for this change in the nature of

governing? In order to help answer this question, I look to Warnick (2007) to understand how technology can contribute to this process.

Interactivity in Online Politics

Warnick (2007) delineates between several different types of interactivity in online political campaigns: text-based interactivity, campaign-to-user interactivity, user-to-user interactivity, and user-to-documents interactivity. Text-based interactivity is based on the use of the active voice in the text itself, and in visual elements, such as photographs of a candidate interacting with voters and the public on the campaign trail. Warnick (2007) writes, “Such site elements function as rhetorical features of the site text that communicate a sense of engaging presence in site visitors” (p. 73). While these sound like superficial elements of a site, Manosevitch (2009) suggests that these elements can actually offer an essential depth to political websites.

Manosevitch (2009) introduced the idea of a “reflective cue” and a “citizenship cue.” She designed fake news articles to look like articles that would be found on the Washington Post’s website. Some of the articles contained reflective cues, which read “*washingtonpost.com*—committed to thinking about issues with readers,” and some contained citizenship cues, which read “*washingtonpost.com*—committed to democracy and citizenship” (Manosevitch, 2009, p. 194). Two hundred and sixty-five undergraduate students participated in the study where they were broken into four groups. The first group was simply asked to complete a questionnaire, the second to read an article without a cue and complete a questionnaire, the third to read an article with the reflective cue and complete a questionnaire and the fourth group to read an article with the citizenship cue before completing their questionnaire. Manosevitch (2009) found that those who

reviewed articles with reflective cues “exerted significantly more *cognitive effort* while reading the article” (p. 197). Her findings suggest that with just a little bit of prodding, Americans will think a little more critically and engage a little more deeply. The text-based interactivity that Warnick (2007) introduces could manifest itself in a citizenship cue that helps inspire the right frame of mind for users to effectively engage with their government.

Determining campaign-to-user interactivity is slightly more complicated, as a campaign is communicating a lot of information directly to the users, but not all of that communication is interactive in nature. Warnick (2007) concludes that campaign-to-user interactivity can be found through a site’s “‘contact us’ email link, information about the location of the campaign headquarters, a Web-based registration appeal, an events notice, and a Web-based contribution feature. Most of these features are initiated by [a] campaign to which the user responds, and in some cases [that] campaign acknowledges the user’s response” (p. 76). These first two types of interactivity align with the first condition of participatory democracy which demands that the public have access to information. However, both types of interactivity are dependent on a campaign initiating communication, which means that campaign remains entirely in control of the interaction between potential voters and their candidate. Warnick (2007) explains, “in some cases the campaign acknowledges the user’s response” but there is no real pressure for a campaign, or government, to further the interaction (p. 76). The absence of continued exchanges between the public and their government in text-based and government-to-user interactivity means the inability to meet the final condition of participatory democracy where the public has adequate opportunities to speak their mind.

The presence of Warnick's (2007) last two types of interactivity is evidence of the final condition of participatory democracy because they provide spaces where the public can better inform their government. User-to-user interactivity, for example, can be found through "online town halls, internet chat, blogs with user comments, and moderated discussions," while user-to-documents interactivity involves users making contributions to the site that then alter the site itself (p. 76). Warnick (2007) explains, "In this form of interactivity, users become active cocreators of messages when they customize site content, vote in online polls, submit questions to be answered on the site, or post messages and photos that become part of the Web site text" (p. 76). The presence of these types of interactivity indicates the desire to consider and discuss the issues facing society. These types of interactivity also hold more potential for influence moving from the public to their government.

With these understandings of online interactivity and participatory democracy in mind, I now offer an analysis of the White House website to discover how interactivity is employed and what that means for participatory democracy in this online space.

WhiteHouse.gov

A visit to the White House website is reminiscent of a visit to the Obama Campaign's site. The website design is attractive, with a hint of elegance that offers the kind of respect that the office of the President of the United States deserves (Figure 2.1). Across the top of the homepage visitors find assurance that they have arrived at the official website of their government's executive office. The words "White House" and "President Barack Obama" are scrawled across the upper left hand corner, a logo of the White House sits in the very center of the page, and, as our eyes move to the right of the

website we are immediately offered the opportunity to “Get Email Updates” or “Contact Us,” with lines of communication seemingly moving to and from the White House itself. Immediately, this website would appear to be home to campaign-to-user interactivity, or in this case government-to-user interactivity. However, it remains to be seen just how *influence* flows through those lines of communication: does it flow in both directions? Is the Obama administration just very good at employing the Internet to its own propagandist end or is it truly making an effort to lend a particularly powerful megaphone to the voices of everyday Americans?

Figure 2.1. WhiteHouse.gov Homepage



As President Obama took the oath of office the new WhiteHouse.gov also made its debut. The very first message from one of the website’s chief designers, Macon Phillips, declared the administration’s intentions to “keep everyone up-to-date and educated” (Phillips, 2009, January 20). The best way of doing so, the rest of the message implied, would be by visiting the website’s Briefing Room, the website’s Blog, and by

signing up to receive e-mails from the administration (Phillips, 2009, January 20). These first two spaces, the Briefing Room and the Blog, help us understand the nature of interactivity and participatory democracy. Throughout my analysis of these two spaces, I consider how well the administration is keeping its promises of transparency.

Transparency: Promise Made, Promises Kept?

Driven by the belief that the American public needs to be fully informed in order to effectively participate and collaborate with their government, Obama made several substantial promises of transparency to be fulfilled once the electorate sent him to the White House (Figure 2.2). Now that he is in the Oval Office, has the President taken steps to fulfill these promises?

Figure 2.2. Obama's Campaign Promises on Transparency

Transparency Promises

- Disclose the names of those interacting with the White House.
- Revoke Executive Order 13233 which further restricted access to presidential records.
- Post pending legislation for five days for public comment before it is signed into law.
- Conduct business before the public.

On January 21, 2009, his first day in office, Obama kept his promise to revoke Executive Order 13233 which made accessing records of former presidents more difficult. Issuing Executive Order 13489, Obama limited the purview of who can use executive privilege to keep presidential documents out of the public eye. With this order, he swiftly fulfilled one of his transparency promises. Whereas it may have taken the better part of his first year in office for the rest of his promises regarding transparency to make their way to the light of day, President Obama is inching (possibly dragging) the

federal government towards transparency. To continue assessing the President's fulfillment of his transparency promises we move to the Briefing Room.

The Briefing Room

On September 4, 2009, the president announced the White House Voluntary Disclosure Policy for Visitor Access Records. The policy stated that the White House would begin releasing visitor records monthly that are from 90 to 120 days old. This policy would affect records created on or after September 15, 2009, which would be released towards the end of December, 2009 (Eisen, 2009, September 4). A blog post, titled "Opening up the people's house," written by Norm Eisen, Special Counsel to the President for Ethics and Government Reform, read, "Aside from a small group of appointments that cannot be disclosed because of national security imperatives or necessarily confidential nature (such as a visit by a possible Supreme Court nominee), the record of every visitor who comes to the White House for an appointment, a tour, or to conduct business will be released" (Eisen, 2009, September 4).

By navigating to the Disclosures section of the Briefing Room of WhiteHouse.gov, visitors can review who has been interacting with Obama's White House staff. The visitor log is displayed in a spreadsheet using Socrata's Social Data Player. Socrata is a website designed for use by federal, state or local governments to share data with the public (Figure 2.3). The data can be viewed through WhiteHouse.gov, through Socrata's website—where users can also post comments about the data—or the data can be downloaded to the user's personal computer. Users can search within the spreadsheet itself, explore different ways to view the information and even publish the information on their own websites or through a social networking site.

Figure 2.3. White House Visitor Log as displayed on WhiteHouse.gov

Search

All Data

or sort by

Reset

You are viewing: All Data

+ Share/Bookmark

| Release Date | Last Name | First Name | Middle Initial | Visitee Last Name | Visitee First Name | Meeting Location | Meeting R |
|--------------|------------------|------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| 04/30/2010 | WASHINGTON | SHAUNDA | | BUNKER | TIM | OEOB | COMMAND |
| 04/30/2010 | AANSTOOS | THOMAS | K | TRUSLOW | SUSAN | NEOB | 9140 |
| 04/30/2010 | AARDEWIJN | MARTIN | | NEYLAND | KEVIN | NEOB | 9104 |
| 04/30/2010 | AARON | BLAINE | F | FLOTUS | | OEOB | SOUTH C |
| 04/30/2010 | AARON | CANDIS | H | KOMMAREDDI | MADHURI | WH | WW |
| 04/30/2010 | AARON | DEIRDRE | A | KOMMAREDDI | MADHURI | WH | WW |
| 04/30/2010 | AASHIYANA | BROWN | N | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBAN | EMMANUEL | C | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBASI | TALA | | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBASZADEH | JAWEED | | NUSRATY | TEMIM | WH | WW |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBASZADEH | NAJIA | | NUSRATY | TEMIM | WH | WW |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBASZADEH | YASAMIN | | NUSRATY | TEMIM | WH | WW |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOTT | ALLISON | | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOTT | ANGELIA | | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOTT | HALLIEANN | E | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOTT | MILTON | | DAPHNIS | KRISTY | NEOB | 10103 |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOTT | RILEY | J | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABBOUD | ROLA | G | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABDELAZIZALAFIFI | SUHA | E | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |
| 04/30/2010 | ABDELHADIISMAIL | ROLA | H | OFFICE | VISITORS | WH | RESIDEN |

111

123456789...Next

To download this data in its raw format, [click here](#). (.csv, 53.6MB)

To download an explanation of the column headers contained in the raw data file, [click here](#). (.txt, 1.3KB)

You can also view, share and comment on this data via [Socrata](#).


The visitor logs include the date the information was released, the visitor's name, their access type, when their appointment was made, the times of the appointment, when the visitor arrived and departed, if the appointment was cancelled, the total number of people visiting for that party, who they visited, where they met, the name of the person who made the WAVES request, where they made the request from, and sometimes a description of the event or meeting. Additionally, the webpage informs visitors that they may make reasonable requests to see records from January 20, 2009 (the day Obama took office) through September 15, 2009. Given the will to sift through the relevant information, an American citizen with access to the Internet can check up on who has

been lobbying the White House and whom, exactly, they have been lobbying. By following the link that re-directs users to the data as it is displayed on Socrata's website, we can tell by reviewing the comments that some Americans are doing just that. However, with only twenty comments total, and only spanning from October 30 to November 2, 2009, it seems that very few Americans are taking the time to engage in discussion on who is visiting the White House. This voluntary release of visitor logs is congruent with the President's promise to allow the public to see whose voice is being represented during policymaking, but the administration did not stop there.

Beyond fulfilling the specific promises listed during the campaign, the administration has taken a few additional steps towards transparency. Mandated by executive order on the President's first day in office, every appointee to the executive office, including all executive agencies, had to sign an ethics pledge. This pledge was supposed to function to keep lobbyists out of the White House through such provisions as not allowing any lobbyists entering government to work with the subject matter for which they previously lobbied for a period of two years after the date of their appointments. The Disclosures section of the Briefing Room also includes PDF copies of ethics pledge waivers that have been granted to allow people to work in the administration, despite the contradiction they pose to the president's ethics pledge. As of January 20, 2010, seven waivers had been posted to the website, and these could easily be saved or printed for a user's personal records. Anyone visiting the website can submit a request via the Disclosures section of the Briefing Room to obtain a financial disclosure report for executive branch personnel. The requests can be fulfilled electronically once the relatively short request form is filled out online. Finally, in the Disclosures section, is the

administration’s “Annual Report to Congress on White House Staff.” Starting in 1995, the White House had to provide Congress with a report detailing each White House Office employee, the title of their position, and their salary. The Obama administration has also made the report available to the public through their website. Visitors to the website can review the title and pay of the administration’s 487 employees on the website itself, or they can download a 29 page PDF that provides them with the same information (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4. PDF version of the Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Staff

|  <p style="text-align: center;">For Official Use Only EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT ANNUAL REPORT TO CONGRESS ON WHITE HOUSE OFFICE STAFF WHITE HOUSE OFFICE and OFFICE OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT As of: Wednesday July 1, 2009</p> | | | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|------------------|--|
| <u>NAME</u> | <u>STATUS</u> | <u>SALARY</u> | <u>PAY BASIS</u> | <u>POSITION TITLE</u> |
| Abraham, Yohannes A. | Employee | 40,000.00 | Per Annum | LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT AND ASSISTANT TO THE HOUSE LIAISON |
| Abrams, Adam W. | Employee | 65,000.00 | Per Annum | WESTERN REGIONAL COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR |
| Adams, Ian H. | Employee | 36,000.00 | Per Annum | EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO THE DIRECTOR OF SCHEDULING AND ADVANCE |
| Agnew, David P. | Employee | 92,000.00 | Per Annum | DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS |
| Ahrens, Rebecca A. | Employee | 42,800.00 | Per Annum | OPERATOR |
| Aidy, Jr., Joseph E. | Employee | 130,500.00 | Per Annum | SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT |
| Alvarado, Lissette A. | Employee | 57,000.00 | Per Annum | DOMESTIC DIRECTOR |
| Amorsingh, Ludus L. | Employee | 54,768.00 | Per Annum | SPECIAL ASSISTANT |
| Anderson, Amanda D. | Employee | 55,000.00 | Per Annum | EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO THE CHIEF OF STAFF |
| Anderson, Charles D. | Employee | 50,000.00 | Per Annum | POLICY ASSISTANT |
| Anello, Russell M. | Employee | 65,000.00 | Per Annum | COUNSEL |
| Aniskoff, Paulette L. | Employee | 72,000.00 | Per Annum | PRIORITY PLACEMENT DIRECTOR |
| Armbruster, Sally M. | Employee | 36,000.00 | Per Annum | STAFF ASSISTANT TO THE SOCIAL SECRETARY |
| Aronson, Lauren E. | Employee | 95,000.00 | Per Annum | POLICY DIRECTOR |
| Astill, Candice L. | Employee | 57,129.00 | Per Annum | ASSISTANT SHIFT LEADER |
| Avery, Heidi E. | Detailer | 162,325.00 | Per Annum | SPECIAL ADVISOR TO THE ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT/DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR |
| Axelrod, David M. | Employee | 172,200.00 | Per Annum | ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT AND SENIOR ADVISOR |
| <p style="text-align: right;">For Official Use Only Page 1 of 29</p> | | | | |

In another section of the Briefing Room, the White House again uses Socrata to share its list of nominees and appointments with the public. The information on White House nominations and appointments can be viewed embedded on the White House site

itself or on Socrata's website. The list contains 643 names in a spreadsheet, which tells visitors what agency and position they have been nominated for, as well as the date of the formal nomination, the date of the confirmation vote, and whether or not they have been confirmed (where applicable). Only two comments can currently be found on the Socrata page regarding the White House data on nominations and appointments. Both were written in the summer of 2009. The first, in July, gave the datasheet a five star rating, and wrote, "This information is useful. Will it be updated continuously? Is this a live data feed?" The second comment, written in August, suggested that a work phone number be listed for each person. As of January 2010, no phone numbers have been added to the datasheet, and no one has responded to the original comment. This exemplifies the limitations of government-to-user interactivity. With no guarantee of productive interaction with government officials, Americans are not likely to be enticed to review the information and offer feedback of any kind.

Each of these public disclosures hints at a willingness to open previously closed doors, and offer members of the public a chance to more fully inform themselves. The Briefing Room provides visitors with information that is essential to their ability to hold their White House accountable, therefore it also fulfills the first condition of participatory democracy that requires the public have adequate access to information. To determine if the Briefing Room also fulfills the final condition of participatory democracy, allowing the public to speak its mind, I consider how well the administration is fulfilling another one of its transparency promises—the ability to comment on legislation.

Commenting on Legislation

On the homepage of WhiteHouse.gov, visitors will find a list of “Featured Legislation.” Beneath the listed legislation, which has already been passed into law, visitors may find two links. (I say they *may* find the links because the text of the two links is particularly small in comparison to other important information on the website and could easily be overlooked.) The first link invites them to “View All Featured Legislation” and the second to “Comment on Pending Legislation.” Choosing either one of these links will re-direct the user to the Briefing Room for more options related to legislation. At the time that I captured screen shots of the website to study, only one piece of legislation was available for public comment: H.J. Res. 64 – Continuing Appropriations FY 2010. (The limited availability of legislation could be due to the fact that Congress was just reconvening from recess at the time I collected data. More recent visits to the site have provided a wider variety of legislation to review.) Clicking on the link to this legislation tells the visitor that “This legislation has been received by the President,” and the user is then given the option to read the actual legislation (which takes you away from the White House website and sends you to The Library of Congress webpage for the bill) or to provide comments on the legislation. Should the user choose to comment on the bill, they would be required to provide their first and last name as well as their email address in addition to their comments. Any visitor to the White House website seems to be able to submit comments of unlimited length, as there is no character limit listed.

The administration appears to be fulfilling its promise to provide legislation for the public. However, where these submitted comments go is a little unclear. The

opportunity to comment on legislation offered on WhiteHouse.gov is a lot like the “tattle bags” offered in some elementary school classrooms. These bags (presumably just your average paper bag) sit in a designated spot in the classroom and when students need to tattle on someone, they “tell” it to the bag rather than the teacher. This certainly makes the teacher’s day less aggravating, and, apparently, the students are appeased by the opportunity to share their troubles with the bag. That is all well and good for those in early childhood education, but is a tattle bag really what the American public needs? If no one is actually reviewing comments on the receiving end of the medium, commenting on pending legislation via the White House website is similar to a digital tattle bag. The lines of communication from the American public to the White House may be open, but the presence of influence flowing to the executive office from American homes is still uncertain. The ability to comment on pending legislation is evidence of government-to-user interactivity, but, much like Warnick (2007) suggests, the administration is not expected to provide responses to those public comments, providing no evidence that those public comments are actually informing the decisions being made by the administration. Therefore, the ability to comment on pending legislation is not meeting the requirements of the final condition of participatory democracy.

In the administration’s first featured section of the website, the Briefing Room, I find evidence of transparency promises being fulfilled. The administration has made more information available to the public in its original form rather than simplifying and summarizing that information before it is provided to American citizens. The Briefing Room is striving to provide one condition of participatory democracy through its attempts to relay necessary and relevant information to the public. As previously discussed,

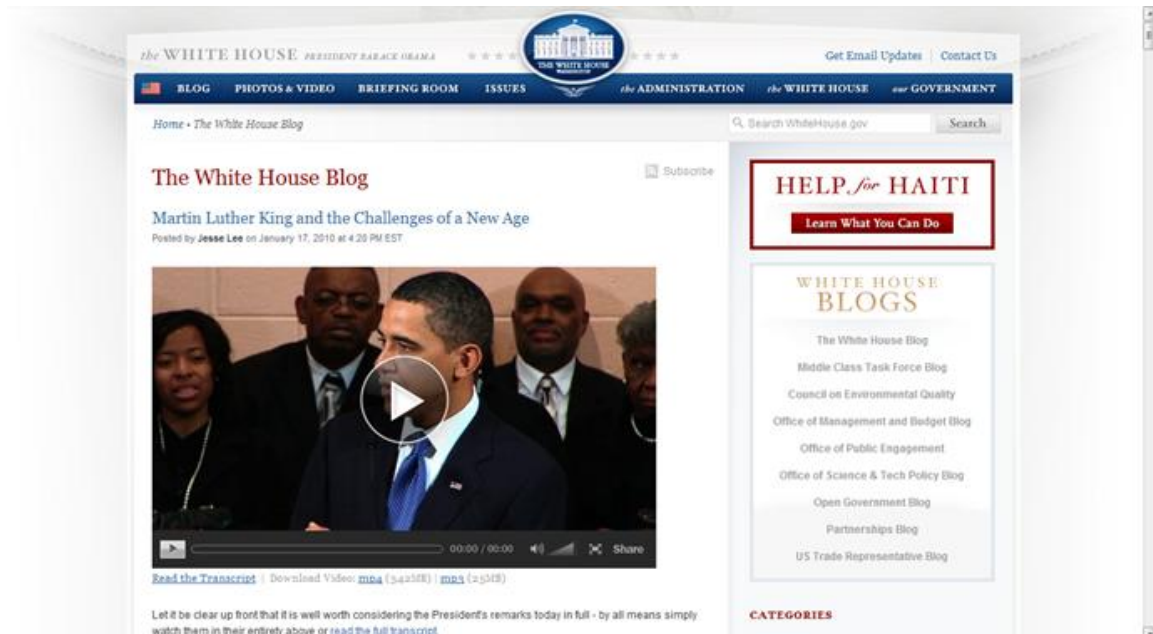
providing the public with access to adequate information is an important first step towards participatory democracy. However, simply providing access to information does not automatically mean that the public has influence over decision-making. Moving into the administration's second featured section of WhiteHouse.gov, I seek to discover how well the Blog contributes to participatory democracy.

The Blog

The White House Blog is prominently placed with snippets of the most recent entries appearing directly on WhiteHouse.gov's homepage. Users can view the blog posts in their entirety by simply clicking on the titles of the posts on the homepage or by clicking on the link to the Blog, which is the first option in the website's menu. Once a user has navigated to the Blog itself (Figure 2.5), given the time and will, visitors are welcome to peruse through the 128 pages of blog posts (as of January 17, 2010), taking them all the way back to the administration's very first entry, "Change has come to WhiteHouse.gov." At the upper right of the first blog post listed is a link for visitors to subscribe to the White House Blog feed, which results in the White House sending blog entries directly to that person's email. From the Blog main page, visitors can easily link to eight other government related blogs, all started within the first year of the Obama administration's term. Below the links to other blogs, on the right hand side of the page, is a list of "Categories," or issues that a visitor can use to sort the posts based on their interests. For example, if the visitor wants to know what the Obama administration has been up to in terms of protecting the environment, they could choose "Energy & Environment" from the list of categories, and the website would pick out all relevant entries for the visitor. Like the main blog page, the website displays the most recent blog

related to energy and the environment first, and the visitor can peruse through the thirteen available pages on the subject at their leisure. Beneath the list of categories reads “Archives,” where the administration has archived all blog posts by the month and year in which they were originally posted.

Figure 2.5 The White House Blog



The Blog is updated daily, typically with multiple entries on various topics. For example, entries for January 16, 2010, included two entries written on America’s continued response to the earthquake that devastated Haiti, a post by Secretary Kathleen Sebelius encouraging Americans to get the H1N1 vaccine, and a brief post about the President’s Weekly Address, which focused on Obama’s determination to get Wall Street to repay the money lent to them to save the financial sector from total collapse. Much like most blogs across the web, the White House Blog is multimedia in nature. They often incorporate appropriate photographs or videos that go along with the content of the post. For example, the Blog’s most recent entry at the time, on a speech given by Obama about

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and what we continue to learn from him today, includes a video of the President delivering the speech. Portions of the speech are quoted in the blog post, but a link is also provided to the full transcript of the speech.

Multimedia features such as these provide evidence of text-based interactivity that gives the blog an engaging feel. The videos typically depict the President or another member of the administration delivering a speech and the photos often show the President interacting with other people. These scenarios give the impression that the president, and the administration in general, is constantly engaging with his constituency and reporting to the people. These multimedia features can also make visitors feel as though they know the president personally because they are privy to see his everyday interactions. This can lead to the impression that the president, and the administration, is approachable, and can suggest that the dynamic between the White House and the public has changed. Many people avoid engaging in political discussions because they are intimidated by confrontation. If the public understands that they can have a conversation with their government rather than a disagreement, they may be more compelled to participate. In order for participatory democracy to really take hold, whoever is in the Oval Office will need to appear receptive to hearing what is on the public's mind, and the multimedia features of WhiteHouse.gov give just that impression.

Additionally, visitors can download their own copies of any of the videos available on the site. This reveals that the President is encouraging citizens to tune into his message in a way that fits their own convenience, making this sort of participation a part of their day rather than a prescheduled time dedicated solely to politics. Those with mp3 players can download a copy of a speech or forum and listen to it on their way to

school or work, for example. This is incredibly important to achieving full public participation in the political process. In the same way that texts themselves, particularly political texts, are intertextual, or necessarily linked to other texts, meaning emerges from these texts in particular ways depending on an individual's social and historical situation (Warnick, 2007). The various ways the administration is offering information acknowledges that viewers are approaching its message from vastly different situations, and encourages them to weave the President's message into their everyday lives, finding its meaning for their particular situation. Providing downloadable content is particularly important to members of the net generation. Visitors to the White House Blog are given a choice of how they want to receive the information they are seeking and are encouraged to engage with that information in their own way. This freedom to choose and the ability to customize one's experience with WhiteHouse.gov, Tapscott (2009) informs us, are two of the defining characteristics of the net generation.

These same features, which encourage the public to archive the administration's communications, are also essential to achieving the kind of accountability that would be a marker of a 21st century participatory democracy. The administration is encouraging Americans to hold it accountable for its promises and actions by allowing the public to preserve the communication they find on the website. Any American who wishes to track the President's progress on a particular issue can easily keep track of what the White House has said and done to make their promises a reality. Essentially, voters could have four years worth of the President's rhetoric at their fingertips to consider when re-election rolls around.

The administration also uses intertextuality by continually linking its information to external texts that extend on original information. For example, following the blog post about Obama's remarks in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a line reads, "Learn more about Civil Rights." The words, "Civil Rights" are a link that takes visitors directly to the Civil Rights page under the "issues" section of the website. Again, in the issues section, the White House takes the opportunity to direct visitors to other areas of the website related to what they are currently viewing. A column on the right side of the page lists blog posts related to civil rights issues, a video of the president announcing that benefits would be available to gay partners of federal employees, and additional items, "From the Press Office," are also listed, such as the Presidential Proclamation of "National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month." The layout of the site embraces nonlinearity and invites its visitors to do the same. As Warnick (2007) notes, "Writers and readers of Web texts anticipate that texts will be read in the sequence chosen by the user" (p. 29). However, Warnick (2007) also writes, "Web authors cannot assume that readers will remain engaged with what they read, and so authors must expend a good deal of effort just to sustain their users' interests. A reading environment comprised of hyperlinks, navigation bars, discourse chunks, multimedia clips, moving characters, and other elements must be so designed that these elements have continuity and meaning for the user" (p. 41). This nonlinearity, then, allows the user to participate in meaning-making for themselves as they chart their own course through the site.

The nonlinearity of WhiteHouse.gov is not only important to satisfying an internet audience, as Warnick (2007) notes, but also to the second condition of participatory democracy. Gastil (2008) points out that it is not enough for the public to simply have

access to information, they also must know how to make sense of that information and come to critical understandings entirely of their own volition. In order to properly hold their elected officials accountable in the information age, the public must be able to adequately assess information and draw connections between different pieces of information to come to a more enlightened understanding of their government. Eveland, Cortese, Park, and Dunwoody (2004) conducted a study on linear and nonlinear websites to understand what impact site design has on knowledge gain. They distinguished between factual knowledge, which is the separate pieces of information stored in one's brain, and knowledge structure, which is the ability to make connections between those pieces of information. Knowledge structure is indicative of the ability to retain additional new information and of the ability to problem solve (Eveland, Cortese, Park, & Dunwoody, 2004). Their study found that nonlinear websites hinder factual knowledge gain but enable knowledge structure, or the ability to see how information relates to each other. Encouraging the White House website visitors to engage the site as they choose is also encouraging their visitors to build their knowledge structure, critical thinking skills and ability to successfully enter the discussion on important societal issues. If users know how to consider the information available to them, they will be better prepared for the final stage of participatory democracy, which requires them to contribute to the discussion.

While many of the links direct users to additional WhiteHouse.gov pages, some do occasionally refer to information distributed by other web sources. For example, "Twisted Logic and Fuzzy Math," a January 15, 2010, blog post by Dan Pfeiffer, links directly to an article in the *Wall Street Journal* announcing the \$145 billion in bonuses

that major financial institutions paid their employees in 2009. Pfeiffer uses this to set up the President's justification for his Financial Crisis Responsibility Fee, which is designed to recoup the remainder of the money lent to the very same institutions to save them from utter collapse. Pfeiffer also offers a link that re-directs the reader to a previous blog post that includes video of the President announcing the fee (Pfeiffer, 2010, January 15).

The White House also uses the blog to inform Americans of what they can do to support the administration. A post by Secretary Kathleen Sebelius reminds visitors about the importance of getting their flu shots, since flu season is far from over. Secretary Sebelius also uses this post to encourage visitors to talk with their friends and family about the importance of taking precautions against the flu, and to announce the creation of the "I'm a Flu Fighter" Facebook application. In what could not possibly be a more boring summary of the application, Sebelius writes, "This application allows users to select a Flu Fighting character and tell their friends that they received the flu vaccination and urge others to do the same. Users can also learn more about the flu vaccine and use the vaccine locator to find a clinic nearby where they can get vaccinated" (Sebelius, 2010, January 16). Social media sites like Facebook have proven that they have a lot to offer in terms of getting people engaged and connected, but I am not sure this passage really does it justice. Choosing a flu fighting character? And announced in such a lackluster manner? This certainly is not the best that can be accomplished with new technologies. The largest age group using Facebook are those between the ages of 18-25 (Inside Facebook, 2010). As of February 2010, this age group has approximately 29 million users (Inside Facebook, 2010).⁵ Tapscott (2009) does point out that the net

⁵ There have been some shifts in recent years as older individuals have also started using Facebook, but, for the moment, those between the ages of 18-25 are still the largest group using the site.

generation wants to have fun every step of the way, but the members of the net generation are not five-year-olds looking for a superhero who can stop viruses in their tracks. They are looking for integrity, and they believe their government should seriously want to engage with them. The application does provide some useful information in that it will tell users about the vaccine itself and tell them where to go to get the vaccine, but it undermines itself by not appealing to Facebook's largest demographic. If choosing a flu fighting character is as fun as governing can get, perhaps the government should forget about making it fun, and tune back in to what its citizens actually need.

The authors of White House blog posts vary widely, and this resonates with Obama's presidential campaign and his talk of needing to hear a variety of voices, as well as the emphasis he placed on hearing from every sector of government about what they are doing or will do for the American public. Instead of having a single spin doctor hired specifically for the purposes of twisting the administration's image into something presentable on a daily basis, the White House Blog gives visitors the sense that anyone in the administration can be expected to report to the people they are supposed to be serving on any given day. While the White House may continue to control the gates, there appear to be more access points. The administration is enhancing the public's ability to hold them accountable by making more members of the administration report to the American people on a regular basis. The variety of voices communicating through the White House website also indicates that the President truly does want to hear from a variety of people and perspectives, in line with his campaign rhetoric. All of this is proof of a foundation being laid for participatory democracy. These opportunities to hear from multiple voices within the White House support participatory democracy in the sense that the

administration recognizes that their job is to act for the people and therefore must report to the people on a regular basis.

The prominence of blog authors also indicates that the administration's Internet audience is taken seriously. Dan Pfeiffer, for example, is the White House Communications Director and the chief architect behind the administration's message to the public. Kathleen Sebelius is the Secretary of Health and Human Services demonstrating that the Blog is important enough to the administration to have a member of the president's cabinet author a blog. The Blog is not simply maintained by a junior level member of the administration who has very little connection to the inner workings of the White House and is told what to write about. The White House Communications Director and a Cabinet Secretary are actively involved in the administration's agenda, and their presence on the blog indicates that the blog is tightly tied to the administration's agenda as well.

The transparency promises being kept in the Briefing Room, and the nature of communication coming through the blog employ text-based interactivity and government-to-user interactivity to lay a foundation for participatory democracy. These sections of WhiteHouse.gov provide users with the information necessary to hold their executive office accountable and begin to critically consider the issues facing the country. The multimedia nature of the blog gives users the impression that the President is continually interacting with Americans and is interested in what they have to offer the political process. The ability for users to easily archive the media they find on the site and the nonlinearity of WhiteHouse.gov encourage Americans to consider the information they encounter on the sites critically, and in a way that makes sense to their everyday

lives. These features can help prepare users to engage in discussions on critical issues. The blog continues to invite Americans to contribute to the administration's efforts through efforts like engaging the public in the campaign for everyone to get the H1N1 vaccine. The blog also pulls from a variety of voices, indicating a willingness to hear from different perspectives. However, so far, each of the perspectives being heard is from within the administration. This means that WhiteHouse.gov has not demonstrated that the public has the ability to exert influence over the White House itself.

In order to more fully understand how the Obama administration is building a foundation using the first condition of participatory democracy, we must understand who is being targeted by WhiteHouse.gov. To do this I ask, who is being hailed by the website and how?

Who is WhiteHouse.gov hailing?

Warnick (2007) encourages critics who are trying to understand online communication to consider how a particular site or page hails its users. Althusser (1971) observes, "the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions" (Althusser, 1971, p. 83). Althusser continues to explain that these ideas are not, in fact, decided upon by the subjects themselves, but, rather, by the ideology that hails them. He suggests "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing" (Althusser, 1971, p. 86). Althusser (1971) elaborates, "There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round,

believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing” (p. 86). Ideologies, which are present in the website of the White House are calling out to, or hailing, its audience in a particular way, and visitors may respond to that hailing or interpretation, but how?

Because this project is concerned with how the administration is fostering participatory democracy, I am particularly concerned with how the White House hails its users as citizens. Levine (2010, January 27) points out that Obama campaigned on a specific understanding of citizenship. As chapter one of this project discussed, the Obama campaign envisioned a future where the average American is as involved in their nation as their politicians; “it’s not just about what I will do as President, it’s also about what you, the people who love this country, can do to change it” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 211). Levine (2010, January 27) understands Obama’s notion of citizenship as *active* citizenship that manifests itself in “organized social movements” and utilizes the “skills, energies, networks, and local knowledge” of people from a variety of backgrounds.

I find evidence on WhiteHouse.gov that President Obama is putting forth a new interpellation of American citizenship that hails the public as continually active citizens. WhiteHouse.gov greets its visitors with a number of active verbs and phrases encouraging them to, likewise, be active. A visitor to the website might “Learn What You Can Do” to help Haitians recover from the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, “Learn More” about the issues and the President’s proposals, and “Join the Discussion.” These active verbs indicate text-based interactivity (Warnick, 2007) and emphasize the opportunities for education and participation that the administration has made available on the website. These phrases also implicitly indicate that WhiteHouse.gov is a gateway

to being an active citizen. Because of this website, Americans can inform themselves on each of the issues that concern them, and engage others in a real discussion on the topic. The administration's website interpellates its visitors as active citizens who want to make politics part of their everyday lives. Users also are invited to "Stay Connected with Email Alerts" and, again, to "Stay Connected" through all of their favorite social media websites. This phrase, "stay connected," is commonly used to emphasize the ability to keep in touch with those who are most important to us, anywhere at any time. WhiteHouse.gov suggests to its visitors that being an American citizen during Obama's presidency means being a full-time citizen, and being in tune with what your White House is up to is just as important as knowing what your friends are up to. These active verbs found throughout the website attempt to help users figure out how they can respond to Obama's interpellation of citizenship.

Obama's new interpellation of American citizenship characterizes visitors to WhiteHouse.gov in particular ways. First, they are characterized as independently, fully informed users. A theme that persists throughout the website, but, particularly, throughout the blog, is the presence of texts in their entirety. Blog entries summarize speeches and announcements for readers, but they also provide the opportunities for visitors to watch or read the entire speech or announcement for themselves. Granted, these communications are not spontaneous, but, rather, carefully planned public relations events. Still, the administration is demonstrating a certain amount of confidence in the American people. Rather than having to rely on the summary of an event provided by the administration itself or the snippets of the President's message that make it onto the evening news, the American people are able to review what the President is saying every

single day, unedited by anyone. In a time when the majority of Americans rely on the filters already in place to control their own intake of information, the Obama administration is encouraging Americans to go to the original source for the President's words and be their own critic. In many ways the White House is giving the American people as much information as possible and trusting them to sort through it themselves in order to come to conclusions of their own volition. The administration's conception of American citizenry depicts users as critical thinking citizens who want the ability to filter their own information.

Similarly, the audience is characterized as needing flexibility in the ways in which they choose to filter that information. WhiteHouse.gov assumes that its users are looking for options in how they retrieve their information. By making the president's speeches, announcements and other events available for download, the user can collect the information in one sitting and begin to sort through it at a time that is more conducive to their schedule. One does not have to be seated in front of their computer at the precise time that the Modernizing Government Forum is taking place in order to have access to the exchange of information during that forum. Each of the sessions that the forum produced will later be available for the user to download and save as long as they wish. These sessions can then be reviewed whenever the user finds adequate time to devote to them. The options embedded in the website itself demonstrate the administration's understanding of their web audience as technology savvy individuals who need technology that brings government to them wherever they are.

Much of what is put forth on the website is done in a way that suggests these actions are being taken on behalf of the American citizens, and therefore the American

citizens should be able to review those actions. Obama's interpellation of American citizenship depicts the public as the administration's employer. For example, what is often referred to as the President's Weekly Address, the website refers to as "Your Weekly Address." This gives the impression that the message has been prepared for the users rather than for the benefit of the administration. Another example comes from one of the blog posts captured in my sample. Dan Pfeiffer closes his blog post titled "Twisted Logic and Fuzzy Math" by writing, "The taxpayers did not rescue the financial system because they wanted to. They rescued the financial system because they had to stop its excessive risk and destructive power from pushing the economy from recession to depression" (Pfeiffer, 2010, January 15). The wording of this particular statement is interesting because it suggests that it was the taxpayers' direct decision to provide the financial sector with monetary support rather than the decision of their representatives to send the money to Wall Street. These closing lines make the American people active in a decision-making process where they actually had very little input. He is also speaking in defense of the American people and indicating that he and the administration are working for them. With these rhetorical moves, Obama is constructing a concept of citizenship where citizens have influence in everyday governing.

Along those same lines, the administration also interpellates the American citizen as intelligent and capable of contributing to the process. At several points throughout the sample of blog posts I reviewed, the administration emphasizes what the individual American has to offer the political process. Secretary Sebelius encourages Americans to do what they can to help fight the H1N1 virus this flu season, demonstrating their capability to contribute to the solution (Sebelius, 2010, January 16). Although, the

administration's strategy to encourage people to campaign for everyone they know to get a flu shot may lack some necessary flair. Another blog post opened with "The White House Forum on Modernizing Government was a unique opportunity to draw on the experience and wisdom of some of the country's top CEOs and workers" (Lee, 2010, January 15). This post indicates that the Obama administration recognizes that the executive office does not have to start from scratch to figure out how to update itself to handle the challenges that face its 21st century citizens. This particular blog post speaks directly to Levine's (2010, January 27) understanding that the President wants to draw from the expertise of many. During a speech on his 100th day in office, delivered in Arnold, Missouri, Obama said, "We need soldiers and diplomats, scientists, teachers, workers, entrepreneurs. We need your service. We need your active citizenship" (qtd. in Levine, 2010, January 27). In this speech Obama directly linked active citizenship with the knowledge Americans gain in their everyday lives. The blog post for the Forum on Modernizing Government indicates that active citizenship can take the form of workers and CEOs helping their government function more efficiently. The post, and the forum that it references, demonstrates that the administration actively seeks advice from those who know better than they do.

Obama is attempting to instill a participatory structure in the democratic ideology of the minds of Americans. Through the work of his administration online, he is hailing visitors to the website as engaged citizens, looking for their chance to contribute to the process. While the 2008 presidential campaign displayed a resurgence in public participation in the election process and grassroots organizing, this notion of democracy as year-round participation is not an integral piece of the American democratic ideology.

As Tapscott (2009) put it, “Between elections there is no real engagement by the citizens in the important decisions that affect their lives” (p. 259). An engaged American citizen has commonly been considered to be someone who casts a vote during the major elections, but the Obama administration is trying to change that perception of an engaged citizen to be someone who stays informed of what their elected officials are doing and does their best to insert their voice in the conversation. Since a shift to participatory democracy in the United States means a shift in how Americans think of their citizenship, the visitors to Obama’s website may not recognize themselves in this interpellation of citizenship and any effort by the Obama administration to increase participation may fall flat. Gastil (2008) reminds us, these types of conversations have not historically taken place in channels that run between government agencies and the American public. Not only is the American public not used to being actively involved in politics year-round, they are also not used to having opportunities to enter into discussions with their executive office officials. It may be difficult for the Obama administration to convince the public that this year-round engagement is a part of their democratic ideology.

A contradiction in how the administration is interpellating citizenship and how the public is being asked to interact with the White House could also be to blame for the administration’s inability to get the public to participate in opportunities to inform the decision-making process. For example, the Modernizing Government Forum was said to “draw on the experience and wisdom of some of the country’s top CEOs and workers,” but a closer look at who participated in the forum paints a slightly different picture (Lee, 2010, January 15). According to the administration’s own blog, over 50 CEOs met at the White House to provide the administration with the knowledge and expertise they have

accumulated throughout their careers (Lee, 2010, January 19). Logically, the administration would want to take advice on how best to manage the government's technology from the most successful corporations in the United States. However, to say that the administration had the opportunity to learn from American workers in this forum, as the opening sentence suggests, is significantly misleading.

This characterization of workers as sources of expertise is even more circumscribed because each of the sessions was attended only by members of the administration and CEOs of large corporations. Among the upwards of 50 CEOs who attended the forum were such recognizable companies as: PepsiCo, Staples, Microsoft, Time Warner, UPS, Sprint Nextel, J. Crew and Facebook (Lee, 2010, January 14). While these large corporations can likely provide critical insights into a digital re-organization of the government, it would be difficult for any average citizen to believe that these kinds of voices were not already being heard. The president, with this forum, encouraged his administration to hear what "Americans" can offer to the political process, but the average American worker was certainly not a part of the discussion. The administration's new interpellation of citizenship says that Americans have something to offer the process, but if the administration claims workers are a crucial source of expertise, and at the same time invites CEOs to attend a forum at the White House, then the average American is not going to find themselves included in the new understanding of citizenship. Therefore, even if the Obama administration were giving the public opportunities to exert influence within the walls of the White House, the average American would be unlikely to participate due to the contradictory nature of the administration's rhetoric.

This entire process, however, did take place in front of a camera. Forums like these that are available to the public are evidence that the administration is, at least partially, working to keep its promise to conduct business in the open rather than behind closed doors. The American people could watch each of the sessions live and can still access video of the sessions on WhiteHouse.gov. The White House also put together a viewing guide that told viewers who exactly they were listening to in each of the sessions and provided a summary of the important suggestions that the administration took away from the forum. The administration made no efforts to hide these forum sessions. In fact, they wanted the public to watch the proceedings. By offering viewing guides to go along with the videos of the sessions, they did their best to make it possible for someone who could not watch the sessions live to still have a full understanding of what transpired during the discussions. Finally, they wrote a follow-up blog post that invited all viewers to comment on what the administration was taking away from the Modernizing Government Forum (Lee, 2010, January 19). Even though it was after-the-fact, the administration did eventually provide an opportunity for any and all Americans—including the average worker—to offer their insights to the conversation. Even though this forum contradicted the work being done on WhiteHouse.gov to hail the American citizens as capable of contributing to the process, it did so in an utterly transparent way. The transparency of these forum proceedings still falls under that first condition of participatory democracy as it continues to provide citizens with all the information they would need to consider and respond to this forum.

We have seen here that the administration's interpellation of citizenship characterizes citizens as continually active, fully informed, technology savvy people who

demand options in how their information is delivered. They approach technology and the information it provides them on their own terms. Additionally, citizens are characterized as the administration's employers on whose behalf the administration's work is done. Finally, despite the contradictions, Obama's interpellation of citizenship says the site's visitors are intelligent Americans who are fully capable of contributing to the process. The characteristics of Obama's interpellation of citizenship are quite similar to Tapscott's (2009) depiction of the average member of the net generation. The net generation's insistence on speed and innovation would be appealed to by the emphasis the site places on being technology savvy and the ability to transfer contents of the site to other media devices for later review. The site's nonlinearity would appeal to anyone valuing their freedom to choose, and customize their experience with the website. WhiteHouse.gov's dedication to providing the public with the means of holding the administration accountable would appeal to the net generation's insistence on integrity, and acting on the information they receive would come naturally to a generation who cherishes their ability to scrutinize any and all organizations with which they come in contact. Likewise, this skill is also important to the development of participatory democracy. In order for the participatory aspects of a democracy to be successful, the public will need to know how to effectively evaluate their government, but also offer meaningful methods of improvement.

An important characteristic of the net generation that the White House has not yet seemed to assimilate to through the White House Blog or Briefing Room is the ability to effectively collaborate. So far, the White House is providing the public with adequate means of scrutinizing the administration, but no opportunities to really help the

administration better serve their constituency. Despite the fact that visitors to WhiteHouse.gov are hailed as being fully capable of contributing to the political process, I have not yet found evidence of the visitor's opportunity to do so directly on the White House site.

If the characteristics of citizenship according to the administration's interpellation align with the characteristics of the net generation, as this analysis suggests, it is important to consider whether or not the net generation makes up the predominant population of visitors to WhiteHouse.gov. If the net generation is not the administration's actual web audience, the website's efforts may be thwarted due to a case of mistaken identity. Alexa (n. d.) reports that the average time spent on the website for February 24, 2010 is only about 2.7 minutes, with no average throughout Obama's first year in office coming anywhere close to five full minutes on the website (Alexa, n. d.). If those who are visiting the website are only doing so for less than five minutes at a time, then they cannot be making full use of the site's interactive features or attempts to encourage the American people to "Learn More" about any of the issues or stances the president has taken on an issue. According to Quantcast (2010), on average 115,000 people in the United States visit WhiteHouse.gov each day. Of those users, however, Quantcast (2010) classifies less than one percent of them as addicts, or users who visit the site 30 or more times in a month. Twenty-seven percent of users are considered regulars or those who visit the site more than once a month, and 73% of visitors to the site are only passers-by, visiting the site once a month. Although it is conceivable that users prefer to get their information from other sources, these statistics suggest that the public is not really making full use of all of WhiteHouse.gov's features. Quantcast (2010) finds

that the age groups frequenting WhiteHouse.gov most often are those between the ages of 18-34 and 35-49. Each group contributes 29% of the site's viewership for a combined total of nearly 60% of the site's population (Quantcast, 2010).⁶

These statistics indicate that, while the net generation is a part of WhiteHouse.gov's largest audience, they are not the overwhelming majority. I cannot positively conclude from this information that the administration's interpellation of citizenship will inevitably fail, but the success of this new understanding of American citizenship hinges on whether or not the public will respond to this interpellation. Since the text I am studying here, WhiteHouse.gov, does not provide me with the means of discovering whether or not the public is actually trying to engage the administration, it is difficult to say how the site's actual audience is responding. The trends suggest that users are only visiting sites for a couple minutes at a time, but it is unclear exactly which pages of the site are being visited and how much time a user needs to spend on a site to properly consider its contents.

Conclusion

Considering our previously established understanding of participatory democracy, and the analysis conducted thus far of WhiteHouse.gov, I find that the White House website is laying an initial foundation for participatory democracy. WhiteHouse.gov is an active archive that contains within it the means necessary to hold its own creators accountable. The site's Briefing Room contains important disclosures to the public that move the White House towards transparency, and make it easier for the American people to keep track of what their government is up to. Likewise, the ability for a private citizen

⁶ Alexa (n. d.) reported WhiteHouse.gov's most frequent audience were those over 65 years of age. However, given the implausibility of the claim and the contradiction between Alexa's and Quantcast's statistics, there was not enough evidence to support that claim.

to download speeches and other government forums through the blog gives them an easier way to compare their government's words and actions to hold them accountable for promises made versus promises kept. The Blog and the Briefing Room both provide users with necessary information to aid their own decision-making processes. The administration is also laying a foundation for participatory democracy through the way that it hails its online audience. The interpellation of citizenship that the White House sets forth characterizes citizens as continually active, fully informed, intelligent citizens who demand flexibility. These characteristics align with the characteristics of the net generation, but also conceptualize citizens who are fully prepared to contribute to a participatory democracy.

Despite the opportunities to contribute to the administration that are available on the website, the administration holds a pretty firm grip on WhiteHouse.gov, and the influence is still only running one-way: from the government to the public. The White House Blog and Briefing Room lack key points of collaboration that could open up the channels for influence flowing from the public to their government. For example, there are no opportunities to comment directly on anything in a way that would allow other visitors to the site to also see their comments and respond. WhiteHouse.gov, thus far, offers text-based interactivity and government-to-user interactivity, but no evidence of user-to-user interactivity or user-to-documents interactivity, leaving it shy of being able to fully promote participatory democracy. The following chapter will analyze the administration's White House Live feature, considering its ability to fulfill the final condition of participatory democracy, which is the public's ability to inform their government's decision-making.

Chapter Three

White House Live

Employing the Internet for information dissemination in the 21st century is certainly essential to effective communication, but only using the net to distribute information does not utilize its full potential. Based on Warnick's (2007) understanding of the various types of interactivity the Internet can provide, the final condition of participatory democracy—giving the American people a chance to speak their minds—is likely to be achieved through user-to-user interactivity and user-to-documents interactivity. To find these types of interactivity on WhiteHouse.gov users must navigate to the White House Live features. This chapter will analyze the opportunities available for users to publically engage the White House via the White House Live feature on the White House Facebook page. The analysis demonstrates that even though White House Live is providing crucial points of interactivity, users' abilities to exercise influence over the online forum, and therefore the White House, remains limited. Before beginning the analysis, I will first consider how the administration is fulfilling the Obama campaign's promises for access and participation.

Access and Participation: Promises Made, Promises Kept?

Obama's promises on access and participation ranged from topics of effective participation in local communities to effective participation in the executive office (Figure 3.1). In May of 2009 the White House revealed Serve.gov (Godwin, 2009, May 21). The site attempts to match interested volunteers with projects in their area that

Figure 3.1. Obama's Campaign Promises on Access & Participation

Access & Participation Promises

- Make it easier for Americans to effectively volunteer their time in their communities.
- Create the America's Voice Initiative to pursue avenues of foreign diplomacy.
- Conduct national broadband town hall meetings on a regular basis.

can use their assistance. Any individual or group that is looking for some extra hands or minds can register their project on Serve.gov and hopefully find the help they need.

Those looking for opportunities to give back to their community can search by keyword for a particular type of volunteer opportunity, as well as by their location, so they can find opportunities close to home. The development of Serve.gov represents the sincerity of the President to get America's citizens involved in the development of their communities.

Obama also promised to establish a program called America's Voice Initiative that would train Americans who are fluent in other languages to travel overseas pursuing avenues of diplomacy with other countries (Obama for America, 2008). However, at this point in the Obama Presidency—over a year into his term—I can find no evidence of this program being pursued. There is no mention of the initiative on WhiteHouse.gov or State.gov, the official website for the US Department of State, under whose command the initiative would take effect. Additionally, there has been next to no chatter on the Internet about the program since the election.

I do, however, find evidence that the administration is striving to keep its promises to amplify average citizens' voices in Washington. The President specifically promised to do this through national broadband town hall meetings (Obama for America, 2008). With a number of town hall style forums taking place on a regular basis via White House Live, there is evidence that the President is keeping his promise. However, the presence of a town hall meeting and the effectiveness of one are two very different

things. The White House is hosting town halls, but are they truly ensuring “that the hopes and concerns of average Americans speak louder in Washington than the hallway whispers of high-priced lobbyists” as Obama claimed they would (Obama for America, 2008, p. 147)? To answer this particular question, I will isolate one of these town halls and assess its impact on the political process.

Chatting with the White House

Users can get to White House Live by scrolling over the “Photos & Video” option from the main menu of the homepage and clicking on the “Live Streams” link. The “Live Streams” link opens a page that streams live video and offers visitors the chance to share or embed this page for others (Figure 3.2). In a column immediately to the right of the

Figure 3.2. The White House Live Streams page on WhiteHouse.gov



video, visitors will find a list of upcoming feeds, including dates and times so users can return later to view any live feeds that interest them. A variety of content can be screened

via the Live Feeds page. For example, on January 20, 2010, feeds for the day included “Mrs. Obama Surprises White House Tour Visitors”; “Open for Questions,” discussing education with Melody Barnes, who is a domestic policy advisor to the president; “Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs”; and “President Obama Speaks on National Mentoring Month.” Additionally, White House Live was also announcing “President Obama Holds Town Hall” in Lorain County, OH to be held January 22, 2010, as well as “The State of the Union Address” coming up on January 27.

Within this webpage we find evidence of the types of interactivity invaluable to participatory democracy: user-to-user and user-to document. The live forums that the White House hosts, often called “Open for Questions,” fit the criteria for both types of interactivity. Users can submit questions to be announced during the forum by following the link clearly marked beneath the live feed video to submit their question to the White House. By submitting a question and having that question answered during the forum, users are affecting the content of the website itself, bringing them a step closer to exerting influence within the walls of the White House as well. While White House Live through WhiteHouse.gov does still provide some sense of user-to-user interactivity—users could gain knowledge through one another based on the questions asked, or could ask follow-up questions based on a fellow user’s inquiry—there is still no clear user-to-user exchange taking place directly on the website. Users’ questions are not posted in a public space where others can read them or assess what kinds of questions are being answered and what kinds are not. To more publically engage other users participating in the forum, users would need to head to the White House Facebook page.

The White House Live page links to the White House Facebook apps page, which visitors can view without being a member of Facebook (Figure 3.3). Any user who is a member of Facebook can join their peers in the discussion or submit a question to be answered during the forum. Here we find two ways for users to affect the content of the website itself and clear proof of user-to-user interaction. Users can respond directly to each other with no middle party reviewing comments before they are posted. The White House Live Facebook application is not nearly as closely guarded as WhiteHouse.gov.

Figure 3.3. The White House Live Facebook app⁷



Not only is the administration *allowing* Facebook users to post whatever they want on their Facebook page, they are *encouraging* it, and encouraging anyone who has access to the internet to, at the very least, watch the discussion. The opportunities available on the White House Facebook site are much more indicative of the possibilities the Internet holds for a more participatory democracy. There may be hope for the optimist's vision of an Obama White House yet.

⁷ This screenshot has been edited to remove participants' names and profile pictures to maintain privacy.

Setting up the Chat

At the upper left-hand corner of the webpage reads “Watch and Discuss White House Live.” While this may just seem to serve as an informative line for what happens on this particular webpage, some evidence points to the notion that titling the webpage in such a way could actually affect the user’s approach to the website. Recalling Manosevitch’s (2009) suggestion that web users may take their cue from headers like these in order to figure out how to approach the site they are visiting, this website once again hails the American people as active, fully engaged citizens. The simple heading for this particular webpage, “Watch and Discuss White House Live” captures the spirit of Gastil’s (2008) argument for what it takes to build a participative society. Information must be made available to the public in a manner such that it can reasonably be consumed. The citizenry must make the effort to consume that information (Watch) and then the citizenry should be offered every opportunity to offer its own opinion about the situation (Discuss). Users have been watching and participating in the White House Live forums and discussions, however, before any concrete determinations can be made, we need to take a serious look at the nature of the discussions that are emerging from the Facebook page.

To do this I used CamStudio software to capture the live forum video and Facebook chat comments simultaneously. This software works like a video camera by recording what is happening on a computer screen. The following pages analyze an Open for Questions forum that took place following President Obama’s 2010 State of the Union Address as it would have been viewed through the White House Live Facebook

app page.⁸ Heather Higginbottom, from the Domestic Policy Council, Brian Deese, from the National Economic Council and Ben Rhodes, from the National Security Council took questions coming in from participants through several sources. Participants submitted questions through WhiteHouse.gov/live, the Facebook chat room itself and Open for Questions on Twitter. For the purposes of this project, I will focus solely on the interactions taking place on the Facebook page.

The nature of the White House Live Facebook app has the potential for dual layers of discussion. The first layer is in the ability to submit questions to the White House and, potentially, have them answered by members of the administration. From this basic idea of how the site is meant to function we can already see how this website is employing user-to-documents interactivity. This interactivity is apparent as users have the ability to affect the content that appears in the chat on the website, as well as the content of the discussion that is presented in the video portion of the forum, where panelist/s respond to questions. With user-to-documents interactivity present in these two fashions, it seems logical that two important aspects of Gastil's (2008) democracy are also present: the user's ability to set the agenda and to offer their take on the situation. On the surface, the Facebook app page appears to provide users with the ability to say what they are thinking through the chat, and set the agenda by posing the questions to be answered by the representatives of the administration.

The panelists participating in the forum following the State of the Union Address had no shortage of questions to which to respond. The most common were questions

⁸ To review the video portion of the forum, please see Open for questions: The State of the Union. (2010, January 27). [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/open-questions-state-union>

about the economy and job creation, closely followed by healthcare, education and the environment, as well as a slew of miscellaneous questions covering a variety of topics. The panel answered questions for nearly 50 minutes, but upon review of the entire interaction, nearly all of the questions posed on the Facebook chat room were left unaddressed. In fact, only one of the questions that popped up in my Facebook viewing window was addressed specifically. The moderator referred to additional questions that had been posted on Facebook, but none of the others were questions that I had also seen being posted to the chat. Part of the reason for this could be that the Chat window refreshes itself, usually every few seconds or so, with a new set of comments, but it clearly says below the window “This is a sample of what everyone watching is saying.” This severely limits the integrity of the discussion. How is this sample chosen? Is it truly a representative sample of the comments being posted or are the comments randomly generated? This makes it difficult for a true discussion to take place since the comments update mechanically, rather than with the actual flow of conversation. The fact that my view of the Facebook chat discussion did not reveal the majority of questions the moderator claimed were being submitted through Facebook indicates that I missed out on a great deal of the conversation due to the format of the discussion.

Responding to the Public

The very first question the moderator chose to pose to the panelists was actually not a question at all. A woman from Michigan lamented via Facebook, “Jobs, jobs, jobs. Tax breaks to get more jobs going. I live in Michigan the economy is horrible. Another local company announced today that they are moving their business out of Michigan. 200 more people in our small town out of work. Something has got to be done. If people

aren't working, then nothing else is gonna work.”⁹ The fact that the first question answered was actually a comment points to the fact that the topics that will be addressed during the forum can still be hand-picked by the administration. The immediate indication is that, although participants can submit as many questions as they like to the forum, their influence is significantly curbed by the fact that the administration can still set the agenda. This expression by the woman from Michigan simply gave Brian Deese the opportunity to discuss the President's plan to encourage job growth in the country. The choice of this particular comment works to promote the President's agenda and suggest that the public supports the President's actions. The moderator used this particular comment in a way that re-appropriated this woman's words for the promotion of the President's policies, and potentially re-appropriates the entire forum from a space for the public to engage with their White House, to a place for the White House to promote their initiatives.

The second question posed was actually several questions on the subject of education directed to Heather Higginbottom, from the Domestic Policy Council. The questions/comments included “Tuition needs to be controlled. There's no reason for college & university presidents to make more than the president”; “What's the plan for student loan forgiveness, and will it help recent grads like me? Only new ones? Only undergrad? etc”; and, “Will the changes to student loans apply to existing loans or just new ones?” from both Twitter and Facebook. Here, the moderator moves the forum closer to what would seemingly be its purpose, providing specific answers to specific

⁹ All quotations from the public comments are reported as they appeared on the website, including typographical or grammatical errors, or as they were read by the moderator of the discussion. The only alterations that were made were if a participant referred to another participant by name, in which case that name was replaced with an alias.

questions about the president's policies. Particularly, the last two questions posed are seeking direct responses to their concerns. The response to these questions, however, was less than direct. Higginbottom could not resist the opportunity to tout steps the administration has already taken to make it easier for people to go to college. Before addressing the topics she was specifically asked to address, Higginbottom first discussed the investments that the administration made in federal Pell Grants during their first year in office, as well as the college tax credit, which was introduced during their first year in office as well. She also informed listeners they were hoping to be able to extend the tax credit into the future. When she did turn to the issue of loan repayment, Higginbottom very clearly laid out the president's proposal for providing college graduates with some reprieve on their loan repayment plans. She explained, "For that recent graduate who's saying how can I afford to pay that loan back, they'll only have to pay 10% of their income on that loan, and after 20 years if the outstanding debt hasn't been totally forgiven, uh totally paid, it'll be forgiven, and if you're in public service it'll be after only 10 years." However, Higginbottom stops short of answering the questions posed to her specifically. Whether or not this policy would affect graduates already making payments on their loans is left unanswered, and this did not go unnoticed by those participating in the forum. Near the end of the forum, another Facebooker pointed this out, commenting, "can you follow up on Student Loans, Heather did not address existing student loans." In this case, whereas a participant may have succeeded in affecting the agenda of the forum, the public still has no effective course of action to keep pushing for the answers they need.

The sole question that the moderator pulled from Facebook that was also a question I could see through my own sample of the questions, was posted by a woman who asked, “Our schools are suffering from lack of funding. Our stimulus money has basically replaced the money the state was contributing. How can technology grow in our schools without proper support?” Once again we see a question that is not exactly being posed because the participant is looking for a direct response, but because she would like to make a comment about the state of a situation in the nation. Including this question in the forum is really just a way of introducing the topic of education at the K-12 level. Higginbottom responded to the question primarily by discussing the administration’s “Race to the Top” program which was all about encouraging schools to employ technology in new and different ways and to create new teacher incentives. “Race to the Top” challenged the schools to find better ways of educating America’s youth and it encouraged them to do so by offering a funding reward for those that were able to demonstrate effective new strategies for broadening young minds. This exchange presents more evidence that the participants have very little recourse to actually determine what will be discussed in the forum, and the administration could simply be tuning in to the comments that conveniently address the subjects the administration would like to discuss on this particular occasion.

While not every exchange between the American public and the panelists was as enlightening as those who had campaigned for Obama had likely hoped, there were some straightforward and potentially useful exchanges making their way from the White House to homes across the country. One Facebooker suggested that the administration work on lowering what she has to pay for her home, especially when the home is no longer worth

the amount that she owes for it. In his response to her concern, Deese talked about the homeowner program that the administration introduced early in their first year that could help those who qualify to lower their loan payments. While he did not go into specifics about who qualifies for this program, he did provide her with the means to learn more about this opportunity by suggesting she (and anyone who finds themselves in a similar situation) visit the treasury and FHA websites. Although this is more evidence of the administration plugging their existing accomplishments, it is also essential to the public being able to fulfill its duties as citizens. As Gastil (2008) reminds us, the public must first have access to information and be able to critically consider that information before it can effectively participate in the governing process.

A question submitted via Twitter asked, “How to end ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.’ Legislation, executive order, courts, how does it work?” In answering this question, Ben Rhodes really took the opportunity to expand on what the President introduced in his speech rather than simply reiterating the President’s words. Rhodes explained to the country why the process of repealing “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” is not quite as simple as it sounds. Rhodes clarified that Obama could not simply repeal the policy with an executive order because the policy was originally put in place by congress, which means that congress also needs to be the governing body that repeals the policy. Rhodes stressed the importance of everyone in the military chain of command fully understanding how the repeal of the act is going to work and how any new policies will be implemented. Rhodes’ response is another example of the panelists providing participants with information that is essential for them to productively participate in discussions with their government.

Given the nature of the questions chosen, there is a genuine concern that the Open for Questions forums could become one more way presidential administrations of the 21st century can communicate their pre-determined message to the public. Each of the three participants in the forum was careful to reference Obama's State of the Union message in their responses, whether or not it was necessary to actually answering the question. However, in an age of 24 hour news cycles and the Internet acting as the perfect environment in which rumor mills can thrive, I do not think the public can necessarily blame an administration for trying to tell the public what they have already accomplished during their time in office, or for simply trying to "set the record straight" which is a phrase that seems to have come up a lot during Obama's relatively short time in the West Wing. Every time a member of the administration is before an audience is a chance to make or change an impression. I am not sure anyone can ask a politician to pass up one of those chances. However, when a member of the American public is waiting patiently for a response to their deepest concern, what the president has already accomplished is not likely to seem like the best use of time.

Understandably, the administration cannot sit for days on end and answer every single question the public feels like posing. However, in 50 minutes, administration officials should conceivably be able to answer more than 14 questions, as they did during the session following the State of the Union. Not only can the moderator (also a member of the administration) set the agenda by choosing what questions are actually being addressed during the chat, there is also no one challenging the panelists to provide specific details in their responses. The idea of being able to ask the question that is most pressing on one's mind unmediated by the journalists covering the White House and from

anyplace in the country with Internet access is intriguing, but without someone in the room to press for the tough questions or for more specific answers, is the public really getting more?

How much is missing?

Just pointing out that the forum did not answer every single question posed (or even a majority of them) is frankly a cheap shot at the administration and a weak accusation of cherry-picking questions that enabled members of the administration to put their best foot forward. Based on the sample of comments being posted that was available to me as a Facebook viewer, I have pulled each of the questions submitted to the panel and organized them based on topics. I now turn my attention to assessing the kinds of questions that were asked in the different categories and exactly how much was overlooked by those that were speaking with the public.

The number one category for submitted questions was the economy, which is also likely the public's greatest concern at the present moment in the United States. This was also the category addressed most often by panelists during the discussion. The forum started here with the response to the comment about the dire need for new job creation. Deese also responded to questions about reducing home payments, boosting exports, creating new businesses, what Obama's proposed spending freeze would entail and, finally, what the plan is to reduce the federal deficit. Responding to these questions, for the most part, allowed Deese to at least touch on the major questions related to the economy. However, these questions also allowed him to avoid answering specifics on most of the ideas the President is putting forth. For example, Deese explained that the President planned to take the money received from the fees applied to the largest banks

and put it into a fund that would be available to lend to those wanting to start their own small business, but he did not have to respond to follow up questions that asked when this money would be available for lending. Similarly, he discussed the President's plan for boosting exports by taking steps like enforcing existing trade laws and opening up new markets but provided no specifics as to how these steps were going to unfold or how this would affect existing businesses in the United States.

Several of the questions left unacknowledged on the topic of jobs were inquiries about the possible extensions of unemployment benefits, what effect the President's plans would have on outsourcing and questions from participants who are proposing particular areas where they believe jobs could be created. Ignoring these last questions is especially troubling since the administration is supposed to be interested in the suggestions that the people have to offer as to how the nation should move forward. A closer look at these questions, however, reveals another layer of complexity preventing these forums from being productive experiences for both sides.

One participant asked, "You state you want to create jobs and improve our economy and fixing our infrastructure. What about creating jobs to rebuild our interstate system, rebuild our national park system and so on." This is an instance where it appears the public is remaining uninformed. Perhaps the participant has a particular project in mind when they suggest money should be put into rebuilding the interstate system, but a visit to Recovery.gov would inform them of where the money from the President's Recovery Act will be spent or has already been spent. The participant could visit the website, type "interstate" in the search box and see if the money is being spent the way they wish. Some states have already received funding to complete projects on their

highways. Colorado's Department of Highways, for example, has received over 60 grants to complete projects around the state (Colorado Department of Highways, n. d.).

Likewise, Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, announced in April of 2009 that the President's Recovery Act would fund over 750 projects in National Parks across the United States (Secretary Salazar Announces, 2009, April 22).

Similarly, another participant asked "to create jobs, why dont we gather people for a think tank who have solutions that will create commerce???" Great idea, except that the administration did that already. The White House hosted a Jobs and Economic Growth Forum on December 3, 2009. The forum invited "leading CEOs, small business owners, labor leaders, nonprofit heads and thinkers about ideas for continuing to grow the economy and put Americans back to work" (Jobs and Economic Growth Forum, 2009, December 4). The administration also encouraged communities across the country to host their own Community Job Forums (Jobs and Economic Growth Forum, 2009, December 4). The fact that these participants did not know that the White House had already taken steps to put their ideas into action says that these discussions are already facing an uphill battle. The President's effort to inform the public of his actions has obviously not been entirely successful. The White House may be putting information online for the public's use, but if the public never tries to find it then they will be attending these forums without the full knowledge of what the administration has already been working on. The public is obviously not taking every opportunity to inform themselves, but the administration also missed an opportunity during this forum to offer these participants more accurate information, and tell them where they could find this information on their own in the future.

Healthcare was the second most popular topic of the questions posed. It was addressed during the forum, but the capacity in which it was addressed was likely unsatisfactory to most viewers. Higginbottom responded to the concern by reiterating the president's commitment to getting healthcare legislation passed and touching on the important goals Obama has for the system that he wants to see included in the healthcare package. Many of the questions posed by viewers of the forum wanted to know precisely what was going to be in the bill and exactly what was going to happen next in the healthcare debate. The problem with these kinds of questions is that, as much as the entire White House would like to, the executive office cannot speak with authority on what the outcome of the legislation debates will be because congress is the governing body that has to pass the legislation. The administration's response to this issue was considerably limited by the circumstances of democratic government itself. Like it or not, the President did not know what would happen next with healthcare, and, likely, neither did congress. While each question posed during the forum was a valid concern regarding healthcare, the administration simply could not respond sufficiently that evening.

The second largest category of questions answered addressed concerns relating to the military. Ben Rhodes addressed the President's strategy for pulling troops out of Iraq, how to end "Don't Ask Don't Tell," taking care of the nation's veterans, and what has been done in response to the failed terrorist attack on December 25, 2009. He was able to cover most of the topics that were concerning people that evening, however, similar to Higginbottom's discussion of the plan for student loan repayment, members of the audience were left wondering who, specifically, would be affected by the changes in veteran policies. One user asked, "how does this affect veteran of the iraq war directly?,"

another inquired, “So you are saying that anyone who has served in the service will have lower payments and better service in the VA,” and still another added, “All Veterans in the past?,” for example. Conversely, there is also the issue of questions being addressed early in the forum, but viewers continuing to ask similar questions, seemingly unaware that that particular topic had already been addressed. The plan for exiting Iraq was outlined by Rhodes early on in the forum. However, one participant asked a series of questions well after this topic had been addressed, becoming more and more insistent as her comments progressed. Approximately 18 minutes into the forum she wrote, “people all over are saying that the plan to pull the troops isnt going to work but what is the plan,” about three minutes later she added, “what is the plan on getting the troops out of Iraq is it going to work im worried about a repeat of 911 PLEASE ANSWER THIS!!!!” Finally, approximately 28 minutes into the forum she writes, “my sister was killed in iraq and i would like to know how long it is going to take for the plan to take the troops out of iraq i cant handle another death in the family!!!!” The perception that the panelists were ignoring an important question could be frustrating to participants in the forum, but in actuality, the panelists may have already sufficiently addressed the question, and due to limited time cannot continue to rehash the same information. About eight minutes into the forum, a solid ten minutes before this participant began submitting her questions, Rhodes clearly laid out a timeline of what troops would be exiting when, and what duties the remaining troops would be expected to fulfill, as well as when the military planned to remove *all* troops from Iraq. With no one informing this participant that her concerns have already been addressed, she will be left to believe that she is simply being ignored, unless she later reviews the chat from the beginning by finding the archived version on

WhiteHouse.gov. If she believes her concerns will not be addressed, she is not likely to continue to attend the White House Live forums. Gastil (2008) emphasizes the need for participatory democracy to consider the concerns of each individual citizen, but a closer analysis of this forum demonstrates just how challenging that actually is. This participant's frustration calls into question the reality of being able to achieve participatory democracy, even with the help of technology.

While we cannot ever expect our government officials to sit and answer every single question that comes before them, I do not think it is out of the question to expect them to answer questions simply and directly, from time to time. By spending much of their time reiterating what the President had already said, or reminding the public of what the president had already done, the panelists missed out on a valuable opportunity to address some legitimate questions that only required simple responses, and, potentially could have helped the administration in the long run. One would expect that an administration who based their campaign on the public's involvement would want to take every opportunity to remind the public what they can do to help determine their own destiny. The panel was given multiple opportunities to help the public figure out how to get involved but did not capitalize on them. Four individuals (in the set of comments visible to me) asked what they could do to make a difference. One woman asked, "What can we do about the recent Supreme Court ruling that will let the corporations run amok. We need a plan. I will start a site, or a petition, what can i, we do?"; another echoed, "What can we, the American public do to help make these wonderful ideas a reality? How can we begin to help?"; another woman inquired on several occasions, "What can we do to support health care reform."; finally, another participant wanted to know,

“Where should I go to get information on how to volunteer? I would like to do my part in seeing that your goals for our country are met.” If the administration truly still wants the public to make a contribution to the process, they are going to have to help them figure out how when individuals are willing to take action. This last question could have easily been answered by directing her to www.serve.gov to learn about different ways she could volunteer to help her community or to what was once the Obama campaign’s website, which is now maintained by the Democratic Party and encourages visitors to “Organize for America.” The Organizing for America site could also have helped the first three participants figure out what they could do to promote the administration’s policies.

Leaving these questions unanswered provides additional evidence that the administration’s actions contradict their apparent hailing of their online audience. The administration’s online efforts hail their audience as continually active, fully informed citizens. However, this forum provides very little encouragement for those looking to do their part. America’s active citizens are invited to attend this 21st century town hall meeting, but they are not guaranteed to get their questions answered, even the ones that would seemingly be beneficial for the administration to handle. This forum hails its audience using a new notion of American citizenship, but continues to disseminate information using the historic notion of citizenship where the citizen has little actual influence.

Public Exchanges

The nature of the White House Facebook apps page affords users the opportunity to interact with each other as well, providing a second layer of discussion. Members of the public who are participating in the chat room can be found commenting on questions

posted by other users, posting questions directed at other participants in the chat room, attempting to advance their own agendas, or even disciplining other participants on the page for not offering productive comments.

First, the Facebook chat room does provide participants with a space to discuss issues that are important to them without interference from any White House official. While questions (or apparently comments) can be pulled from the participant comments to be answered in the forum video, no one from the administration actively posts responses back to participants in the comments section of the app. On the one hand, this represents a thick divide that still exists between the people and their government; a gateway exists that continues to be controlled by government officials unlocking the gate only for those comments they deem worthy of voicing to all those watching. This scenario has members of the administration successfully avoiding being caught up in the flurry of comments coming from America's concerned citizens, suggesting citizens do not have the power of agenda setting or the influence indicative of participatory democracy. However, there is another hand that says the lack of presence from the administration in the comments section of the app preserves that space for the people themselves. It encourages them to conduct democratic discussion among themselves on the topics they choose and with discipline coming only from within. Gastil (2008) provides support for this notion as well, saying that much of the political discussion will take place outside of government. The people need to speak with their government, but it can be just as important for them to speak to each other. If the public is not satisfied with their government's actions, they need to organize together in order to do something about it. Obama has in fact given the American people a public (cyber)space to say what they

wish to whomever they wish, and he has done so in a place that prominently bears the signature of the White House. He even puts his very own officials in front of the screen for scrutiny on a regular basis. This is certainly the largest step towards the average citizen's voice being heard in the White House in quite some time.

Ironically mirroring the partisan bickering that Americans have become so adept at denouncing as typical Washington behavior, some participants brought a decidedly uncivil tone to the chat room. Comments like

[Stacie], if the President does away with SS disability most Republicans would eat dog food and live in cardboard boxes. lol.

and

[Bradley], are you so unsure of your message that you need to repeat it endlessly?

do very little to further any kind of great discussion. If the American public wants more access to their government, and more opportunities to affect the political process, the public will have to figure out ways to interact with one another and their officials in ways that are productive. Mimicking the gridlock and petty exchanges of congress in these public forums will only give government officials reason to ignore these sites of discussion. Some participants recognized this and attempted to discipline others for only offering what they felt was pointless spouting. For example,

Ask questions and quit the banter. How will Clean Energy Jobs be built into a stronger platform by the WH that continues to push for a bipartisan climate and energy legislation.

For all of the comments that refused to engage in civility, there were those who approached an interaction with a fellow citizen with all due reason. These exchanges demonstrated how these forums are capable of functioning in more productive ways.

When one participant wondered,

Is there anyone considering getting rid of the filibuster??????

another responded,

I don't think we can get rid of the filibuster. Such a bill would have to pass the Senate, and I don't think either party would want to give that up.

This second participant demonstrated how it is possible to disagree with another human being while still acknowledging their inherent dignity. She gently prodded the conversation toward one that enhanced the public's knowledge of their own political process by allowing them to learn from one another. Similarly, there were participants who attempted to use the Facebook apps chat room to bring people together:

Meet other interested in Green Energy: <http://www.meetup.com/workingtogether>.

Still others were just doing their best to share the information they had with their fellow chat room participants, who could also benefit from that knowledge. For example,

[Ms. Ferrer], the website can be found here: <http://hap.usace.army.mil/>.

Unfortunately, the previous part of the conversation that inspired the distribution of this information did not show up in my sample of comments, but there were other exchanges where I was able to confidently piece together conversations. For example, one participant asked

i missed the address, where can i watch it?

and less than a minute later she received a response,

msnbc is running it right now.

One of the aspects of this site that makes it incredibly difficult to study also has a hand in making it difficult for those trying to participate. The following comment by a participant sums it up well.

This was a good idea but it goes too fast to really have an intelligent conversation.

The White House reported during the forum that over one million people tuned in to watch the State of the Union online that night, and, in a follow-up blog post, added that over 50,000 of those people stayed to participate in the chat (Cole, 2010, January 28). With so many citizens tuned in and commenting on the site, the comments were continually updating about every five seconds or so. That barely gives users enough time to glance over a comment or two, let alone respond to any of them. And that is with the comments updating with only a sample of all of the comments coming in, which leaves one wondering if the comments would ever stop updating if participants could see every single one of them. Perhaps allowing viewers to see a sample of the comments actually gives them the chance to see more than they could with every single comment appearing on their screen. However, that brings us directly back to the above comment; how will we ever get a meaningful conversation out of this chat room if we cannot see/engage with every piece of the conversation? How can we ever be sure that the person to whom we have just responded will ever see our response? And when participants post simple responses such as “I agree” how does one tell for certain what it is they agree with? While the Obama administration is providing this space for Americans to engage and voice their wishes, the concern remains as to whether or not their voices will in fact be

heard by anyone. Recalling Gastil (2008), who said a democracy “must have the capacity to hear from thousands or even millions of fellow citizens at the same time,” we know that this is crucial to the search for participatory democracy (p. 8). The Obama administration has not yet delivered a “sophisticated means of collecting, processing, and distributing information and experiences among its diverse, large membership” (Gastil, 2008, p. 8). At the same time, however, I am not prepared to blame the Obama administration for the limitations of technology. The fact that this opportunity exists in its current form leaves me optimistic that the opportunity will exist in an even better form in the future, as technology continues to evolve to accommodate our ever growing networks.

Signs of Advancing Online Strategies

The White House has taken steps to invite the kind of input necessary to make its use of the Internet more effective as Obama’s term progresses. Obama appointed Aneesh Chopra as the nation’s first ever Chief Technology Officer to coordinate efforts among federal agencies and “to ensure that they use best-in-class technologies and share best practices” (Obama for America, 2008, p. 88). It seems that the administration officials in charge of launching their online efforts really had their work cut out for them as well. There have been reports that the White House “computers were so old they couldn’t actually run social-media Web sites” (Alan Rosenblatt qtd. in Manjoo, 2010, January, 21). Not only is technology not quite ready for an entire nation to get together for a discussion online, but, until recently, the White House was not even ready to participate in what are now basic interactions with their constituency. More recent developments in the administration’s online strategy indicate that the Obama White House is dedicated to

continuing their pursuit of the best strategies for more effective use of technology, as well as their will to hear from the voices of average Americans on the subject.

In October of 2009 WhiteHouse.gov opened up its own coding by moving to open source programming. This means that the website's code is now written in full view of the public, who can collaborate in the coding effort. With the potential for thousands more eyes reviewing the website's coding, weaknesses can be uncovered sooner making the site more secure. Elliot (2009) also explains that this can save the American people money. When changes need to be made to the website they can be made more quickly with many more people working on the coding rather than the government officials having to work through all of the coding themselves (Elliot, 2009). Elliot (2009) implies that the White House technology crew is looking to continually upgrade WhiteHouse.gov to further encourage participation from the public. He writes, "60,000 watched Obama [sic] speech to a joint session of Congress on health care. One-third of those stayed online to talk with administration officials about the speech. But there are limits; the programming used to power that was built for Facebook, the popular social networking Web site" (Elliot 2009). Elliot (2009) continues quoting Macon Phillips of the Obama administration, "We want to improve the tools used by thousands of people who come to WhiteHouse.gov to engage with White House officials, and each other, in meaningful ways." Perhaps a greater mechanism for interaction with the White House is in the future of WhiteHouse.gov, but the technology simply is not available in the form that will have the greatest impact on democracy at this time. So, the White House is limited to the current available means to engage their public.

Reflecting on the Process

Participants also used their commenting powers during the forum to provide feedback on the question and answer process. The reviews were mixed, with some participants finding the app refreshing, while others found it to be more of the same. Those who were more positive about the process said things like,

I like this better than watching news pundits, at least the q's are from a diverse audience.

and

Facebook fans are much more polite than tweeters. Most comments on the Twitter site are down right evil and hateful.

These participants were appreciative of the fact that the Open for Questions forums are at least offering the public a chance to do the asking, and like the opportunities to respectfully reflect on their fellow participants' thoughts. These comments reflect the notion that the Obama administration is offering the public more opportunities to gather more information from more people. Other participants, however, were not quite so accepting of the efforts the administration is making. Those who did not particularly enjoy their forum experience expressed,

I have to say that I have not seen a lot of the facebook questions tackled. I have to agree that it appears to be a restatement of talking points.

as well as

All this country is TALK TALK TALK this chat was pointless, none of the questions I read here were asked, the average american is never reported!!

and, finally,

details...need details...

This set of comments articulates legitimate criticisms of the White House Live forums. The ability to interact with White House officials on a regular basis is pointless if the public cannot actually get more out of the interaction. The public is looking for more specifics. They need more details about what the President is proposing. If the public is not going to get the kind of answers they want, and do not get assurance that their concerns will be addressed, they will not continue to log on for these forums.

These critical comments are also indicative of the major obstacles still standing in the way of the final condition of participatory democracy. The Obama administration, with its Facebook apps page, is giving the public the opportunity to question its actions, previous and planned. It is no small matter, however, that the administration itself maintains its hold over which questions get answered and which ones get continually put off for another day. While groups of Americans like CEOs get invited to the White House to participate in a Modernizing Government Forum, the average American must try to make their voice heard through the flood of comments arriving electronically. The limits of technology that are apparent through the Open for Questions forum press upon society the continued necessity for interactions that take place in the same physical location, outside of cyberspace. An individual's concerns are much more likely to be heard and addressed if they are in the physical presence of their government officials. There is some evidence that the administration recognizes this fact, as the President encouraged communities across the country to replicate the Jobs and Economic Growth forum in their own areas. The remaining necessity for interactions taking place outside of

technology raises questions of whether or not participatory democracy can ever be achieved with a national population as large as that of the United States.

With full knowledge of the limitations, it is also important to acknowledge the significance of the space in which these interactions are taking place. While the members of the administration speaking with the public during their Open for Questions forums will never be able to answer all of the public's questions, they will be picking and choosing what they answer on a popular social networking site. This is the very same social networking site that was credited with having revolutionized presidential campaigning from the ground up. Members of the American public can monitor their access to information closely, and if they are not happy with what is available to them they can use the very same space that the Obama administration is using to organize on their own behalf. The net generation already demonstrated during the 2008 election that they know exactly how this could work.

The Obama Administration and the Net Generation

The Open for Questions forums available through Facebook reveal that, like WhiteHouse.gov, they too tap into characteristics attributable to the net generation. The White House Facebook apps page encourages collaboration and conversation with both the members of the administration that participate in the Open for Questions forums and the other citizens participating in the chat. If the interaction between administration officials and the net generation is not as collaborative or conversational as they would like, the net generation is already prone to scrutinizing groups with which they interact. The net generation appreciates the ability to review their interactions and does not hesitate to do so. Therefore, the net generation is primed and ready to take advantage of

the fact that the White House apps page is wide open, and regularly presents their ideas and employees to public scrutiny. Likewise, their insistence on integrity could result in the same scrutiny if promises made are not promises kept. The speed of the chat room was of some concern to participants who struggled with being able to keep up with the conversation, but if there is a group of Americans that would be able to take the nonsensical fragments of the sampled Facebook comments and make sense out of them, it is the net generation.

Evidence of simultaneous multi-media use also emerged from the comments being posted on the Facebook forum. The State of the Union Open for Questions session happened (not so accidentally I am sure) to overlap into the time when the Republican response to the State of the Union was airing on television. A number of participants in the chat room commented on, or let others know that they were watching the Republican response. While many of those who commented were clearly supporters of the Obama administration, they still made the effort to seek out the Republicans' message. They chose to engage in both mediums rather than choosing one over the other. I certainly would not argue that any American citizen can effectively gain information from two sources simultaneously, but their efforts are reflective of the type of society in which Tapscott (2009) claims the net generation will thrive.

If any doubt remains that the Obama administration has targeted young Americans with their online presence, one simply has to look to the final question posed to the panelists during the forum. All three of the White House panelists responded to a question from a seventeen year old on Facebook who wanted to know how all of the topics they had discussed during the session affect his life. The panelists answered his

question, but also spent time discussing why the Obama administration has worked, specifically, to engage young Americans. Higginbottom prefaced her response with

It's really important for young people to be engaged in the political process, to be aware of current events, to be participating because you can influence this country, you can influence this policy, you can influence your government. . . .

We have tried as an administration to create as many opportunities for people of all ages, but most importantly young people to really be part of this government.

We want to hear from you, we want to talk to you, we want to talk with you, so we're delighted that you're asking this question.

This passage of Higginbottom's response underscores the fact that the Obama administration has not forgotten the impact of young Americans on their presidential campaign, and confirms that the administration's online presence aligns with the ideals of the net generation. This passage, and this entire exchange between the panelists and the participant, is important for an even simpler reason that reflects the significance of the administration's online presence. In this administration, it is possible for a seventeen year old, or an American of any age for that matter, to ask a question directly to White House officials who work closely with the President of the United States on important issues, or, depending on who is conducting the chat, possibly even the President himself. The potential impact of this process on future exploration of participatory democracy is critical. While the administration is still clearly capable of determining what, precisely, will be covered during the chat, it truly has opened the doors to more direct exchanges between the President and the American public.

Rhodes' response picks up where Higginbottom's left off, further exploring precisely why the administration spends so much time trying to draw in the net generation. He explained,

I think that the President talks often about the fact that we live in a kind of interconnected age, when our fates are really tied to fates of people beyond our borders as well, given the changes brought by globalization. . . . So, this interconnection I think is something that will define life for younger people, and it's why a lot of people, I think, were drawn to the president. He represented a kind of 21st century view, why we had a lot of young people in our campaign, who provided a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but also ideas. Because they understand things, just to take what we're doing today, I think we've all been struck by how people around the world who are young have used technology in ways that have surprised even governments. . . . So, we have a lot to learn from young people around the world and it's something that I think will be an opportunity to us moving forward and something that I think gives us a sense of purpose here every day at work.

Rhodes clearly explains that the reason the Obama administration wants to engage young Americans is for their expertise. He suggests that the net generation understands the impact and potential of technology, potentially, better than any other generation of Americans. If this is really true then the nation as a whole will benefit from the collaboration of their government with young America. Rhodes' comments emphasize that the administration does not just want the attention of the net geners during times of

campaigning to exploit their youthful vigor, but also during times of governing because they have ideas that can keep moving the country forward.

Finally, Deese emphasizes the points made by Higginbottom and Rhodes by looking at what they have already accomplished and explaining why he has so much faith in young Americans.

I think the fact of this president and the fact that he was standing in the well of the House of Representatives giving the State of the Union Address tonight, it is a symbol of the change that young people can bring, and we have seen time and time again throughout history it is young people where the energy and the enthusiasm and the ability and willingness to stand up and say I'm not going to accept the status quo, I'm not going to just accept that things have to be the way that they are whether it's on climate change, or whether it's on healthcare, or whether it's on the basic security of middle class families it comes from the young of this country.

Deese claims that the election of Obama to office is proof enough of the power of the net generation. Considering the importance of young America as laid out in these three passages, the White House would be foolish not to attempt to engage this young generation of Americans, fostering their potential, which is also the potential of America's future. To ignore this segment of the population would be to ignore the full possibilities of technology to better accomplish America's goals and would ignore an opportunity to weave participation into their understanding of democracy. To ignore all of this would also be ignoring the opportunity to lay a foundation for a fully engaged citizenry and a government that uses that citizenry to inform their every decision.

However, the administration's decision, which seems so obvious when laid out like this, has not been without its consequences. Some explicit concerns about the administration's interest in the net generation emerged from some who participated in the forum. One participant asked,

Why the constant appeal to the youth demographic by President Obama. Are they the only people dumb enough to support it?

Despite the obvious fact that the net generation is the future of the United States, this participant questions both their intellect and their importance to the future of the nation. Another participant responded to this question by acknowledging the importance of engaging citizens in the process at a young age.

[Mr Brown], the youth is our future (and social security payers), so I understand his focus. They get involved now and maybe they won't make the same mistakes that our generation did.

This participant is supportive of the administration's decision to reach out to young Americans, but more than one person was concerned by the involvement of younger Americans in the discussion.

A number of participants in the forum expressed a decided distrust of the process due to the age of those answering questions for the White House. The following exchange took place between two participants in the session over the course of a little over two minutes.

Participant 1: Baby Boomers control gov, business, lobbyists.. why are young people with no influence talking?

Participant 2: someone said earlier about young people without power being the one's talking ... it's time for baby boomers to start letting us younger generations actually giving up power.

Participant 1: Results will only occur when we address the aging population.

While the initial comment is left a little ambiguous, it can be inferred that he is referring to the panelists in the video as being the “young people with no influence.” Heather Higginbottom is the Deputy Director of the Domestic Policy Council, Ben Rhodes is the Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications and Brian Deese is Special Assistant to the President for Economic Policy. Their titles suggest that they might, in fact, have some influence. However, this participant was not the only one expressing concern over who was being sent by the administration to conduct serious discussions with the American public. Further into the session his thoughts were echoed with

kinda appalled at this kids show. Is it MTVObama?

and

why am I listening to a chat conducted by children...you are well educated and informed, but we need some people with more life experience to particlipate...thanks.

These comments express a concern by non net generation users that their government is not in capable hands. So, exactly how young are these government officials?

Brian Deese is only 31 years old, but was the very first person appointed to Obama's Auto Task Force, suggesting that the President is reliant on Deese's economic council and therefore the public should be interested in what he has to say (Brian Deese,

2009). Like Deese, Ben Rhodes is also in his thirties, but has made significant contributions to the Obama administration already. He “contributed to the Iraq Study Group and the 9/11 Commission reports” and “helps craft the campaign’s message on hot-button topics like the Iraq war, military intervention in Pakistan and whether to sit down with rogue foreign leaders without precondition” (Ben Rhodes). Age aside, should not the American people want to have access to a member of the administration who has this kind of influence in the nation’s security? I have been unable to ascertain the precise age of Heather Higginbottom, but her influence in the administration is as significant as her fellow panelists’. She was a key policy advisor to Obama during the campaign and “is widely credited with fostering the campaign’s image as a low-drama environment where diverse opinions were welcome” (Heather Higginbottom, 2009). Prior to working for President Obama, Higginbottom served as legislative director for Senator John Kerry from 1999 to 2004, as well as his policy director from 2004 to 2007 (Heather Higginbottom, 2009).

Aside from the fact that they needed to be older, it is unclear precisely what criteria these Facebook participants were looking for in the panelists speaking for the White House. Each one of them is a person that the public should want to hear from. However, the fact remains that if the public beyond the net generation does not trust the younger members of the administration who conduct these forums, then they will not engage in the forums in any meaningful way. The analysis of WhiteHouse.gov in chapter two discovered that the administration is hailing their web visitors using the typical characteristics of the net generation, but they may not be the visitors who are actually frequenting the site. On the White House Live Facebook app we find real evidence of the

severe consequences that can come as a result of the administration's outreach to the net generation.

Conclusion

While the ability to ask questions directly of White House officials would suggest the kind of participation essential to the creation of a participatory democracy, the current online exchanges fall short of the final condition of participatory democracy. Through White House Live, the public continues to receive more information from more people, but without the ability to exert any real control over the direction of the discussion, there is no evidence that the public is able to exert any influence over the White House itself. Some of the fault lies with the ways in which the administration conducts the forums, and some of the fault lies in the simple limitations of technology itself. The comments made by participants in the forum indicate that they are fully aware of the fact that the administration's online presence hails its audience in ways that parallel how the net generation would hail itself. Unable to identify themselves in the same ways that the White House is attempting to interpellate them, the actual audience is not fully engaging in the elements of participatory democracy the administration has put forth, limited though they may be. Beyond this lack of engagement is an even more detrimental consequence to the administration in that their actual audience, or at least the non-net geners among them on the Facebook app page, shows signs of distrust building out of this inability to recognize themselves in the interpellation emanating from the website.

The final chapter reflects further on the constraints facing the future of participatory democracy in the United States. The final pages also consider the

difficulties faced in conducting this particular project and what they mean for future studies of political interactions online in the discipline of communication studies.

Chapter Four

Reflecting on Findings and Considering the Future

This project attempted to answer two fundamental questions. The first sought to find what web-based technologies the Obama administration has employed to fulfill its campaign's promises to change the nature of democracy in the United States. The second sought to understand how those strategies may or may not foster participatory democracy. This concluding chapter will discuss the findings that emerged from analyses of WhiteHouse.gov and the White House Live Facebook app page. The remaining pages will also discuss the limitations that this project faced, and look forward toward future research in communication studies on the subjects of political participation and participatory democracy.

Using the Internet for Transparency and Participation?

The Obama administration is fulfilling most of its promises for creating government transparency and opportunities for the public to participate in its government through the Briefing Room and the Blog on WhiteHouse.gov, and through the White House Live feature on their Facebook page. In the Briefing Room, Obama is disclosing information such as White House visitor records and the administration's employee records. Obama's officials are continually keeping the public up-to-date on the latest happenings in the White House and other executive office agencies through the White House Blog. By releasing more information and requiring more administration officials

to report directly to the American people, Obama is fulfilling his promises to make the operations of the executive office more transparent to the public.

Obama's promises for participation would make it easier for the public to volunteer in their communities, give Americans who are fluent in foreign languages the opportunity to represent their country abroad, and provide the public with regular access to their government through online town hall meetings. Obama fulfilled his first promise by swiftly creating Serve.gov, but there is, so far, no evidence that Obama's second participation promise is actually going to come to fruition. The White House Live feature is the most significant way in which Obama is fulfilling his promises for participation because the feature provides the means to host online town hall meetings. Obama's campaign implied that these meetings would allow the public to participate in ways that would change democracy, but, so far, this does not seem to be the case.

Using the Internet to change democracy?

The fulfillment of these promises alone is not enough evidence that the Obama administration is attempting to foster a contemporary understanding of participatory democracy. This participatory democracy would allow more voices to inform the decision-making process and enable the public to better hold their representatives accountable. Gastil (2008) explains that this process requires multiple conditions in order to be successful. First, the public must have access to adequate information, then the public must critically engage and consider that information, and, finally, the public must have the opportunity to set their government's agenda and have their opinions considered (Gastil, 2008). In order to understand whether the ways in which the administration is fulfilling their promises also fulfills these conditions of participatory democracy, I

considered what types of interactivity were available to the public through these texts, and how the administration was hailing their online visitors.

WhiteHouse.gov is providing more information, in more ways, through more voices, directly to the American public. However, communication on WhiteHouse.gov still comes largely through one-way channels. Warnick's (2007) conceptions of interactivity on the Web explain that WhiteHouse.gov uses text-based interactivity and government-to-user interactivity, which may provide the illusion of engagement, but really offer no opportunities for the public to meaningfully participate in their government. However, the content being provided through this site is essential to the participatory process. The White House is disclosing information, and reporting to the public in ways that enable the public's ability to hold their representatives accountable. This access to information is the foundational condition of participatory democracy. However, WhiteHouse.gov itself comes nowhere near the final condition of participatory democracy, but this first condition is still serving an important purpose in the overall process.

The presence of user-to-documents and user-to-user interactivity on the Facebook site suggest that the public has influence on this space and has an opportunity to engage in two-way communication with their White House. Unfortunately, even though Obama is keeping his promise to host online town hall meetings, this project finds that these meetings, in their current state, do not significantly move the nation towards participatory democracy. This space makes government officials accessible to the public on a regular basis, but there is no guarantee that the public is going to get the kind of answers they seek. The public can exert influence on the text itself in this space, but their ability to

influence the agenda of the forum is much more tentative. These conclusions from the analysis of the White House Live feature align with the conclusions of another study on Obama's Open Government efforts. Konieczka (2010) found that Obama's Open Government dialogues, conducted during the summer of 2009, did not demonstrate that those participating in the dialogues would have any effect on actual policies. This project found similar constraints. With no guarantee that the public can determine the content of the forum, and no guarantee that their government will truly be listening to their opinion, this site also falls short of promoting the final condition of participatory democracy.

Barriers to Participatory Democracy

This project also found that a significant part of the problem could come through contradictions in the administration's communications with the public. Both of these texts offer a new interpellation of American citizenship, hailing Americans as continually active citizens who can make important contributions to the process. However, the ways in which the administration is actually interacting with the public contradict this hailing. The analysis of the administration's Open for Questions session revealed the same kind of general responses that the public is used to hearing from its politicians. Those participating in the forum were looking for much more specific answers, and an opportunity to really discuss the problems facing the nation with their White House. Instead, those participating were treated much more like an audience than a public (Hauser, 1987). They were asked to sit back and submissively take in the positions being offered to them rather than offer up their own position (Hauser, 1987). The administration is attempting to initiate a new understanding of American citizenship, but their actual interactions with their citizens do not push citizenship much beyond casting a

vote on Election Day. Some of this contradiction could stem from the official functions of the executive branch. Conversely, members of Congress hire employees whose sole responsibilities are to respond to constituent inquiries. Therefore, Congress is likely much more adept at assuring citizens that their voices can be heard between elections as well.

The analysis of the White House Blog and the words of administration officials themselves revealed that the administration's understanding of citizenship would likely appeal to the net generation. This finding aligns with similar findings by Boys (2010) who discovered that emails sent out by the Obama campaign and administration appealed directly to the traits attributed to the net generation. However, Obama's appeals to the net generation in this case were found to be problematic for a couple of reasons. Primarily, the net generation does not appear to be engaging with President Obama in the same ways that they engaged with Presidential Candidate Obama. While the largest group of users on WhiteHouse.gov does include the net geners, they are not the overwhelming majority. This means that the administration is hailing an audience that is not made up of the demographics that they anticipated.

Obama's appeal to the net generation was also proven to be problematic because older Americans are wary of young America's participation in their government. My research unearthed some resentment and frustration that has grown among non-net geners as a result of the attention paid to young Americans by the administration. This resentment seems to be stemming from a fear of being ignored or overlooked by their government, and a distrust of the public officials before them based on a lack of years and a perceived lack of credibility. This speaks to a profound obstacle facing the future of participatory democracy in the US. The process will be effected not only by who the

administration is inviting into the discussion, but also by who the public believes is worthy of participating. If non-net geners believe Obama's staff, who appear to be young, are too inexperienced to discuss the nation's most crucial issues, what must they think of the net geners participating in the forum? If the administration truly wants to see all of America engaging in the process, they will have to find ways to reassure non-net geners that they are still valued, while also convincing them that young America needs a voice in the process.

These analyses found that the administration has not yet found a way to "benefit on an ongoing basis from the wisdom and insight that a nation can collectively offer" (Tapscott, 2009, p. 260), but this is not entirely the fault of the White House. The limits of technology, and the demands of participatory democracy, itself, stand in the way of achieving the final condition of participatory democracy. Gastil (2008) insists that a participatory democracy "must have the capacity to hear from thousands or even millions of fellow citizens at the same time" (p. 8). The nation faces a dilemma of how to effectively hold a dialogue with all of America's population. Based on this analysis of the White House Live feature, it is evident that the United States does not yet have this capacity. Technology certainly strengthens our chances for participatory democracy, but what can be produced when users are only privy to a sample of the conversation and new comments are streaming passed the screen every five seconds? Plus, there is the additional dilemma of other users attempting to participate in the same discussion through a couple different sites, like Facebook and Twitter. The one thing that keeps hope alive for a participatory democracy is the fact that humans are curious and keep pushing

on those limits of technology. Several months after the 2010 State of the Union Open for Questions session, technology has already started to work out some of these problems.

The White House introduced UStream into its technology repertoire on March 17, 2010 (Lee, 2010, March 16). The White House UStream site is similar to the layout of their Facebook app page with a video screen to the left and comments updating to the right. The main difference is that users can post using their Facebook, Twitter, AIM or MySpace names all on the same page. The site does not announce that the comments being displayed are only a sample, so users are left to assume they can see the entirety of the discussion. The ability to see the whole conversation may be enhanced, but, seemingly, the problem of keeping up with the conversation remains, or could even be worsened. If users could not keep up with the sample of posts from Facebook users alone, how can they keep up with a site that attempts to merge the conversation and draw *more* people in? Even with this advancement in technology, the concern remains that effective discussions on a national scale are not realistic possibilities.

Additional Barriers

The findings of this thesis hint at several other barriers to participatory democracy that fall just beyond the scope of this project. The first is the public itself. The administration may be responsible for the first and final conditions of participatory democracy, but the public is responsible for connecting those conditions. The public may say it wants a more transparent government, but in order for that transparency to truly be effective, the public will need to actually inform itself beyond what the news media puts in front of it. The public also needs to engage the discussion in productive ways. Those participating in the forums should keep in mind their own level of frustration when they

see mudslinging emerging from the floor of Congress, rather than efforts to better the lives of Americans. Some of the exchanges emerging from the Open for Questions forum were not altogether better than the exchanges on the floor of Congress. Having seen the kinds of results that emerge from these interactions, the public should seemingly be spurred to take a vested interest in conducting a productive discussion. Plus, if America's citizens want to change the nature of democracy, they have to start by changing the nature of citizenship, particularly with how they think about participation. Despite the contradictions in communication from the administration, the White House is hailing a new kind of American citizen, one that is deeply engaged in everyday governing. It is the public's responsibility to respond to this interpellation in a way that demonstrates they are up to the challenge of being an active citizen.

This project found several indications that the public is not prepared to accept such responsibilities. Statistics show that America is not visiting WhiteHouse.gov on a regular basis, and what time they do spend on the site may not be sufficient to critically consider what they find. Although, some Americans are actively seeking more opportunities for engagement on WhiteHouse.gov. An online petition has been created to allow users to publically post comments on the site (Ellis, n. d.). So far a whopping 25 people have signed the petition (Ellis, n. d.). Thomas Jefferson, from the beginning, was wary of elected officials becoming dishonest. He wrote, "Our rulers will become corrupt, our people careless" (Jefferson, 1999, p. 55). Speaking of the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, he continued, "From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill. It will not then be necessary to resort every moment to the people for support. They will be forgotten, therefore, and their rights disregarded" (Jefferson, 1999, p. 55).

Jefferson knew that America's democracy would not remain pure. The only way to keep elected officials honest is for citizens to stay deeply engaged in the process. Americans hail themselves as good citizens when they vote on election-day, but history has shown that is not enough to hold elected officials accountable. The public is not recognizing itself in the administration's interpellation of them, but if they want change they need to embrace the interpellation of citizenship it takes to make it possible.

Levine (2009, November 23) suggests two strategies for instilling in society the kind of active citizenship that has been discussed in this project. First and foremost he writes, "Get them while they're young, receptive, and a captive audience. Build really engaging, unbiased, motivating, and informative civic education into the school curriculum" (Levine, 2009, November 23). Obama has been trying to do this by reaching out to the net generation, but it has become apparent through this study that non-net geners are not fully enticed by their strategy. Additionally, Obama tried to reach out to school children to speak to them about their education and role in civic society but was accused of trying to indoctrinate those young Americans into his socialist agenda (Silverleib, 2009, September 5).

Levine's (2009, November 23) second strategy for encouraging active citizenship is to "Reform institutions so that hands-on participation by ordinary adults is welcomed and rewarding. The theory is that people who see tangible impact from their own civic engagement (mainly at the local level) will want to be informed and to exchange ideas and perspectives with people different from themselves." If the Obama administration truly wants American citizens to be active participants in the process, they are going to have to provide them with material evidence that they can influence their government.

The administration should begin by eliminating the contradictions between how they are hailing Americans and how they are actually interacting with them.

There is also evidence, however, that the public is not participating because it is unaware that the opportunities exist. The popular news media have largely ignored the Obama administration's online efforts, leaving those conversations to online communities. A number of news sources informed their readers/viewers, for example, that 48 million people tuned into Obama's first State of the Union address (*USA Today*, *ABC News*, *The New York Times*, just to name a few), but that number only includes those who watched the address on television (Carnia, 2010, January 28; Associated Press, The, 2010, January 28; Stelter, 2010, January 28). Most of the reports from the news media did not even inform their viewers/readers that the address was available online. This is a problem because 1.3 million people tuned into the live stream and over 50,000 of them stayed after the address to participate in the forum (Cole, 2010, January 28). The lack of attention paid to the administration's efforts to re-construct American citizenship suggests that the news media does not believe this shift is necessary or important to the future of the country. On one hand, it seems cruel to expect the media to report on tactics designed to eliminate them from the communicative process. On the other hand, the media, the public's greatest asset in accountability up until now, could be doing more to help the public learn how to engage these online texts. How much of what is happening through White House Live events does the public even know about? It is likely that the public would have to already be intimately connected to the White House in order to know that these events are happening. How can more Americans be pulled into the process if they do not know the opportunities for participation are there to begin with?

Limitations of the Study

The nature of this project presented several challenges to answering my research questions. The most significant challenge manifested itself in the complexity of the Internet. The Internet is layered and much more fluid than most other mediated texts. The layers of the Web make it difficult to determine which aspects of a website will be productive to answering the questions a critic sets forth. There is no clear beginning and no clear end to Internet texts, making it difficult to clarify the parameters of a study. Internet texts also refuse to remain constant, making finding those most important spaces of the website even more difficult. This fluidity of the Internet means that the ability to preserve the text is an even more pressing issue.

The administration made capturing WhiteHouse.gov relatively simple, since all of their videos and blogs are archived or can be downloaded for safe keeping. Additionally, a series of screenshots could be taken to ensure the preservation of the particular set of experiences I studied in the project. Capturing the Facebook app page, however, brought a whole new challenge to the project. Because of the ability for the Internet to layer itself in meaningful ways, I needed to be able to simultaneously record the visual comments updating on the screen, as well as the video streaming live next to them. The possible methods evolved from literally videotaping the computer screen for the duration of the forum to plugging the computer into a television and then recording what is happening on the TV screen to finally discovering the existence of CamStudio software that solved all of these dilemmas in a much simpler fashion. The rich layers of the Internet are what makes it so important for researchers to continue to study, but they will also continue raise new challenges for critics in terms of how they can be preserved for deeper analysis.

Communication researchers are just beginning to ask questions about the important interactions that are taking place online, so the foundational methods for how to study such a text are not quite as rich as that for other mediated texts. Warnick (2007) has laid out some foundational work for studying rhetoric online, and her work was essential to this project for understanding methods of adapting existing communication theories for their application to Internet texts. However, her existing work primarily considers online campaigning, as prior to Obama's election there was very little online governing taking place that was of any significance at all. Much of Warnick's work will apply to the online rhetoric of everyday governing as well, however there is at least one significant difference in interactions between the people and their government during an election and the people and their government between elections. During a campaign the people have the final say in casting their votes giving them significant influence. Between elections, the pendulum of influence swings the other way with very little influence being available to the public during everyday governing. This factor must be considered in current and future studies of the Internet's effects on democracy in the United States. Our research methods will need to continually evolve in order to be able to study the cyberspaces that have become so important to every aspect of our lives today.

In communication research, the critic must always be wary of becoming too involved in what they are studying for fear of changing their findings. However, to get a clear understanding of the texts in this project, being tapped into the texts themselves was almost essential. Not knowing the inner workings of Facebook would have severely limited my abilities to understand how the White House Live Facebook app functions. Additionally, taking the opportunity to interact with WhiteHouse.gov as much as possible

was essential to understanding the opportunities available to users on the site, and how well the administration's promises were being fulfilled. The stance of the researcher in studies of the Internet must shift to one of an insider in order to respond to the layered and fluid nature of the Internet.

Further Research

This project is, I hope, one of many inquiries into the possibilities of how the Internet can be employed to change the nature of democracy in the United States. As technologies continue to evolve, it is essential for communication scholars to continue to consider what it means to be an American citizen. In particular, what does it mean to participate in the political process, and what does participatory democracy look like? Is it possible for participatory democracy to emerge in a nation as large as the United States? If the public accepts a more active definition of citizenship, can technology make it possible for the public to effectively collaborate with their government? Future studies of the uses of technology to engage the public in their government are necessary to understand how society can manage this many voices in a way that is productive to the democratic process.

Research should continue to ask questions of how the government is engaging with their public, but also of how the public is defining its citizenship role. Given the opportunity to gather crucial information from their elected officials and have their opinion heard, will the public engage in the everyday political process? Tapscott (2009) has particularly high expectations for the net generation's role in their government, but so far there is very little evidence that suggests young America's notion of citizenship goes much beyond Election Day. Is their lack of presence and enthusiasm solely the fault of

the administration for not effectively engaging them or has the net generation stepped back from political participation altogether?

Future research must continue to push on existing methodologies to respond to the changing nature of the texts that are essential to societal exchanges. Scholars can continue to use and build from Warnick's crucial work on studying online texts to help society understand how these technologies can and are influencing their government and their lives.

Considering the Future

Although the findings of this thesis have not overwhelmingly demonstrated an American public collaborating with their President, this critic finds herself unashamedly optimistic and intrigued by the next chapter of American history. While there is considerable evidence that politics are progressing as usual in Washington, D.C., if one looks closely, they can see small changes that are considerably important. One such change would be the President himself sitting before a camera and responding directly to criticisms and concerns from the public. During an Open for Questions session on February 1, 2010 Obama was asked why healthcare discussions had not been made public (Your interview with the President, 2010, February 1). In response, he validated the critique of the lack of transparency during the process saying, "I think it is a fair criticism, I've acknowledged that, and that's why as we move forward, making sure that . . . everybody understands exactly what's going on in the healthcare bill, that there are no surprises, no secrets, that's going to be an imperative, it's going to be one of my highest priorities" (Your interview with the President, 2010, February 1). On February 25, 2010 the President hosted a bipartisan meeting with congressional Republicans and Democrats

that could be streamed live online, allowing the public to actually witness their officials debate the issue (Bipartisan meeting on health reform, 2010, February 25). As Levine (2010, January 27) would point out, this was still not any sort of real engagement with the public that allowed America's citizens to really participate in the discussion, but it did at least bring the meeting out from behind closed doors. Whether or not this action was taken in direct response to public concerns cannot be positively determined, but it certainly suggests that the people's will *could* be done given the proper channels for the people's voice to reach the White House.

An intriguing thought has arisen from this study in considering how President Obama's legacy is currently being captured. The White House Live Facebook app clearly states that public comments posted on the site could be subject to the Presidential Records Act. I am curious to know if the archive of Obama's presidency will reflect all of these voices participating in the forums, even if their voice was never really given credence during the forum itself. Following the signing of the healthcare bill, the President himself invited all of those Americans who fought long and hard for healthcare reform to add their names to his as co-signers of the bill (Obama, 2010, March 23). How will history look at this moment? Is this just a public relations gold mine, or is the President demonstrating his own humility and belief that this presidency really is not about writing his legacy, but about moving the country forward collectively? The multitude of voices that could be captured already in the presidential archive would suggest that Obama really is changing America's approach to democracy, but just because voices are being recorded for history does not necessarily mean they are influencing the contemporary discussion.

It will be interesting to see how history looks on Obama's years in office, but, for the moment, it will be even more interesting to see what these initial uses of technology by the Obama administration will lead to next. Researchers must continue to ask questions about the Internet and government, because technology is not finished evolving, and, hopefully, neither is the White House.

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