



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – Media 140 Conference

Keynote remarks of Ambassador Bleich for the Media 140 Conference “How is the real-time web transforming politics?” at Old Parliament House, Canberra

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Thank you for that kind introduction.

It is a great pleasure to be here today to speak with you about how new media is changing politics. This is a subject that I care about personally and have even lived through.

I’d like to speak to you less as the U.S. Ambassador than as a web user. I’m sure that to some of the people here people of my generation must seem like fossil; I was around even before Al Gore fathered the internet (something which, despite all the jokes, has some truth to it). I admit that my first browser and email account were on systems that most people have never even heard of any more like PC Link, Prodigy and CompuServe.

But I have an advantage in keeping up with technology over a lot of people my age. I have teenagers. In fact, I have teenagers who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. So that’s why I got on Facebook and MySpace and Twitter and Skype and other websites... Because it is the only way I could communicate with my kids. It also explains why I actually understand references to Antoine Dodson and “Equals 3” on YouTube.

Just so you know, other people—who are probably my kids age—also understand social networks and have gotten us up to date. We’re on Twitter as USAembassyinOZ, on Facebook as australia.usembassy, on Flickr as usembassycanberra, and on YouTube as usembassycanberra as well. We also have a basic website: Canberra.usembassy.gov for your parents. And that’s not even mentioning the accounts that our Consulates have. So you should check those out and let us know how we’re doing.

Finally, I worked with the Obama Campaign, including co-chairing the California Campaign. And so it is mostly based on those experiences that I want to share with you some thoughts about how President Obama embraced new media platforms during the 2008 presidential campaign and some of the things we learned.

Let’s start with how the Obama campaign got into new media. The old saying is that necessity is the mother of invention. The reason that the Obama campaign built its strategy around the web was that we didn’t have a choice.



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President Obama did not have much of a chance of winning the nomination when he first decided to run for President. Although he had enormous public appeal as a Senator and was drawing large crowds everywhere he spoke, he didn't have any of the basics that you need to win a race: money, endorsements, name recognition, and consultants. He was running against then-Senator Hillary Clinton, who had been a household name for over two decades. She had helped create the most effective fundraising organization in the last 50 years of Democratic politics, with all of the big Democratic donors. She had locked up most of the major endorsements since virtually every successful Democratic politician knew the Clintons. She was the best known Democratic politician in America. And she had already hired all of the most sought-after Democratic strategists.

Barack Obama, by contrast, had no national fundraising base. He had been relatively unknown until 4 years earlier. He had only served 2 years in the Senate and so was not owed any favors by endorsers. Most strategists thought his name—Barack Hussein Obama—was a liability. And since many of the best strategists were taken, he had to rely on guys like me to help the campaign.

Now both Americans and Australians love to get behind an underdog—which is why the Saints and Magpies are going out of their way today to talk about how long it has been since either won a Grand Final. But the reality is, underdogs usually stay “under.” To use an example from Major League Baseball, although people in 49 states cheer for anyone to beat the New York Yankees, the Yankees have won the World Series 27 times. We may cheer for the underdog but the odds are that the underdogs playing the same game the same way against the champion usually don't win.

So President Obama had to do something different. He needed to be creative and not rely on the same playbook the candidates had used in primary after primary. For example, we realized that he did not have support of the establishment or people with big money. He was never going to find 60 people to raise a million dollars each for us the way other candidates were doing. So instead he needed to flip that figure: he needed to find a million people who would donate \$60 each. If we could just find a million regular people to give \$5 per month, we could be competitive. The problem was that—although lots of other people had had the same thought before—no one had ever been able to do it.

Likewise, he couldn't get influential political leaders to endorse him. Instead he needed to find a different kind of opinion leader—the person in your school or your office or your church who people trust, who they listen to. He needed to find those people and let them hear his story.

As for Barack Obama's lack of name recognition, or negative associations with his name, he needed to make it both familiar and fun. He needed to make it a name that everyone



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knew, that they wore on hats and t-shirts. That they adopted and played with like Barack-the-Vote or Barack-and-Roll.

And he needed consultants who—although they may not have played the game before—had special tools that would allow them to catch up quickly.

The fact that the Obama Campaign simply had no choice but to try something different to accomplish these things turned out to be a tremendous advantage, although none of us involved in the campaign actually realized that at the time.

For one thing, our long odds meant we were under-estimated and so no one cared too much about what we were doing or tried to copy us. The competition, though fully staffed with skilled and intelligent political professionals, was relying on the same media strategy that had been successful for President Clinton fifteen years earlier. They all looked at e-mail as if it were still the best available technology. Senator McCain didn't even go that far. He was asked in the Republican Candidates debate if he used a Mac or PC. He said that he didn't use either. His wife had one but he wouldn't even know how to turn it on.

Now of course, this doesn't mean that no other campaign in 2008 used social media. In fact, every one of them used it in one way or another. The platforms were common enough that every campaign realized that there was some potential there, and Joe Trippi with the Edwards campaign had been a pioneer in using new media. But while most of the other campaigns saw social networks as a new means to reach some younger voters, it was mostly a footnote. The Obama Campaign made it a core of their strategy. Just as John Kennedy realized that TV—which in 1960 had been thought of as a tool for entertainment rather than politics—could change politics, Barack Obama saw the same thing. The moment for this media had arrived but only one of the campaigns was prepared to go all in on it.

So what was the strategy? It came down to one basic insight. When President Obama saw all of the new media tools at our disposal during the campaign—Facebook, Twitter, SMS, Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, the website - he thought about them from the vantage point of a community organizer rather than as a traditional political campaigner. He saw them as ways for his supporters to mobilize more supporters, rather than simply a medium for getting our message out or receiving donations.

Community organizers believe in face-to-face conversation, because they know that most people need some personal contact to become passionate about an issue. Although initially this meant going door-to-door, later they learned that you could reach a lot more people in a personal way by phone banking and phone trees. To President Obama, social networking was simply the next great advance— a chance to have a personal contact, one



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on one with all of your friends, and for them instantaneously to become phone-bankers themselves and reach out to all of their friends.

People went to barackobama.com not to just watch a video from the campaign or read a reformatted press release or send a donation, but to connect with others. It was a space to meet other people who cared about the issues of the campaign the way you did. You could exchange ideas, share videos, shop for Obama gear, enlist others to contribute, create your own profile page.

While others simply saw the computer as a fancy mailbox or a television set, Obama saw it as a community. So the field operation set about deploying community building tools in the virtual world just as they would have in the real world. They understood that it was not just about raising money or sending a message. It was giving individuals the ability to have a personal stake in the race—to be part of a community, to help shape a brand, to break down social barriers.

The numbers tell the story of the success of this strategy. More than 2 million profiles were created on MyBarackObama.com. 200,000 offline events were planned, over 400,000 blog posts were written, over 3 million calls were made in the final four days of the campaign alone using MyBO's virtual phonebanking platform. And this was just on MyBO. He had 5 million supporters in other socnets, and maintained a profile in more than 15 online communities including Facebook where he had 3.2 million supporters. His email list contains over 13 million addresses. To put it in perspective, four years earlier, the Democratic nominee, John Kerry had 3 million email addresses. Ultimately 3 million donors made 6.5 million donations online adding up to more than \$500 million. Of those 6.5 million donations—\$6 million were for \$100 or less.

I think some people however draw the wrong conclusions from this success. So let me offer a couple of thoughts:

First, new medium is not a magic pudding—it doesn't produce results if the content isn't there. It is clearly not enough to simply use the technology—Facebook page, check, yes, we have one of those, tweeting five times a day—yes, we're doing that, videos and statements up on YouTube, yes, we have a ton of those.... None of this would have mattered if the public hadn't felt as if they were participating in a real conversation. This is the trap that many people fall into when they think about the power of this technology. They assume that content that would fail in other media will magically succeed in social media. It doesn't.

If I have one insight that I hope you'll take away, it is that new media should not be thought of as creating a new method of communicating. Its real power is in finally giving political leaders the ability to communicate through media the same way that they



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communicate in person. Think of it this way. Imagine you got to a political event. This is how people interact. They arrive in someone's home, usually early. They mingle, compare notes, talk about the candidate, and meet other people who support the candidate. Then at some point someone they know, someone local, stands up and explains why they support the candidate and what everyone there needs to do to help the candidate win. Then the candidate speaks and we listen to the speech and react either with shouts or whispers or applause or glances to one another. After the candidate finishes, a few people may get to shake his or her hand, but most don't. The group then discusses what they just heard and saw together, maybe they pick up a souvenir like a cap or a scarf, and then they make plans for getting together again.

The reason MyBarackObama worked was not that it transformed the experience of supporting a candidate at an event, but by reflecting and mimicking the same experience. Its genius was in providing a new means for human beings to communicate the way they have always communicated.

For this reason, my guess is that the most successful platforms of the future will be those that take this concept to the next level, which most naturally reflect our way of communicating. For example, the way we reach out to close friends is different from how we reach work friends or relatives or social friends.

A second insight about social networks is this—like society itself they are organic and to some extent outside your control. A key aspect of the success of the Obama campaign's use of new media was understanding that in a social network just like any social group, it is futile to think you can control everyone else's actions. Most of the other campaigns were interested in collecting email addresses and mobile numbers, because those were one-way communications they could control. But they were nervous about going further and giving people a platform that was linked to their name. They correctly assumed that people could say embarrassing things and that this could be dangerous. The fact that the President was willing to loosen the reins was based on his experience as a community organizer. He had faith that if people are trusted to be themselves on line, they will be no better or worse than they are off-line.

At the time it seemed like a huge risk and experiment, but in hindsight it was common sense. If people are acting like jerks online, others will cut them off. If they are interesting and kind, they will attract more contacts.

Remember the Will.i.am video on YouTube: "Yes We Can"? That idea didn't come from the campaign. It came from Will personally. He'd been inspired by the New Hampshire speech, and he called his friends and recorded it. Afterward, he tried to distribute the video the normal way through his record label and they didn't know what to do with it. It was too political and didn't really fall into any kind of category of music.



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So he just decided to release it on YouTube and see what happened. He didn't check with the campaign because he already felt empowered by the campaign.

These things tend to snowball. When things like that work out, it makes you want to take risks. Why not announce the pick for Vice President via SMS message? Give it a shot.

Now of course, not every experiment is a success. I'm not sure that Obama Girl's video singing "I've Got A Crush On Obama," helped us too much. And other decisions within the campaign seemed very risky. But you don't know what will work until you've already tried it. In the case of the Biden announcement, no one knew how the press would react to being cut out of the loop, deprived of their traditional role of being the conduit for key developments and pronouncements of the campaign. There was no backlash at all. In fact, it freed them up to do the more interesting work of their job which is to provide context for an event rather than merely showing the event. In sum, I think all of this was made possible by the willingness of the campaign to accept that if you buy into social networking, you can't try to control it, any more than you could control any community.

Finally, an online community, like a regular community, is built not on technology but on trust and sincerity. In this way, it favors political leaders whose message is in line with their medium. For example, the Obama campaign's political message was about inclusion, empowerment, openness, and transparency. One of the reasons why the online community was so coherent in his website was that the decision to join the community required some belief in those same values. The use of new media complimented and reinforced the message. The tremendous amount of user generated content, from blog posts, chat groups, videos—it all meshed with the campaign's emphasis on authenticity and openness in government and an invitation for citizens to participate directly with their government.

Now let me turn to challenges. There are some challenges with new media that haven't been solved. As I mentioned, the use of new media created a sense of personal investment in the campaign that was unprecedented. If you think about teams that you've played on, or a play that you acted in, or your graduating class, or some other group with whom you shared a deep personal bond, and then the season ends or the show closes or you graduate and there is this great sense of loss. During the celebration you all promise that you will stay in touch, but only a few of you do, and maybe not for very long. While this sense of personal connection energized the campaign and inspired hundreds of thousands of new people to become involved in politics and the democratic process for the first time, the fact is, it is nearly impossible task to maintain that heightened sense of connection after the campaign ends.



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This points out a problem that we have yet to solve. Social networking technology is a fantastic resource for campaigns and elections; it's one that encourages citizens to be invested and involved in their government as never before. It works in part because electing a candidate is ultimately a community event—it depends on the will of the people.

But how well does it work for governance. Six and a half million people literally invested in the President—what expectations do they have after committing to the President in this way? Think about it in the non-virtual world. In the non-virtual world, most of the six million people who donated to the President are hundreds if not thousands of miles from the White House. They do not expect to see or speak to the President, or anyone who works for the President. They also don't expect any special one-on-one response from the President. If the President were to make a simple gesture like shaking each of their hands in the oval office and saying their name and the word "thanks" —just six and a half million names and the words "thanks," he literally would have done nothing else during his time in office. And yet, in the virtual world, a lot of people feel that as online Obama supporters they should get a personal online Obama experience.

A second issue is how to keep the personal network away from the private network. Consider my own situation. After I was nominated as Ambassador to Australia, I woke up the next day to find that I had 500 new "friend" requests on Facebook. On the one hand it was wonderful to get all of this personal outreach from people I had never met who wanted to get to know me and wish me well. But it also created a problem. I already had, you know, my actual friends on this account. And the kinds of things I wanted to share with them, or that they might put on my wall, weren't necessarily the sorts of things I wanted to have as the first contact with all of these new friends. Since it would be months before I could be confirmed by the Senate, I couldn't have the State Department set up an Ambassador Facebook page. And I was in a Catch-22: the only way to explain why I couldn't friend all of these people was to friend them, so that I could send them that status message. But even if I could friend them now, is that really what you want your public figures to do?

If social networks are going to resemble real life once in office, then they have to mimic a very different experience than election networks. What we expect political leaders to do in real life is work—which includes spending most of their time reading, discussing, debating, managing, casting votes, etc., and only devoting some appropriate defined periods to being out among the public for some direct exchange with their constituents. We need to change expectations that simply because a forum is always open, public figures should be available there.



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The larger question is how does all of this energy get harnessed and put to use in a new “socially networked” government? We’re still working on it and I don’t think this question is close to being resolved yet.

Large institutional bureaucracies need to speak with one unified voice. This is hard to make vibrant or interesting in the off-line world, and so it is hard to make it any more satisfying in the on-line world. If you employ new media in a way that is not genuine, is overly controlled or contrived, your community will lose interest and tune you out. So we are still working out the borders and boundaries, the strengths and limitations of these new media and how we can use them to connect with audiences and counterparts.

My view here in Canberra is that, taking a lesson from the Obama campaign, we really cannot afford to be overly cautious and afraid to experiment. Our challenge is to stand out and stay relevant in an increasingly crowded and noisy marketplace of ideas. But we have greater risks if we don’t have a more calibrated environment. An SMS message campaign that might spread an important message through the community of university students in Kenya may fall flat in Indonesia. A Facebook post that may inspire passionate discussion in Uruguay may not get a single comment on a page in Germany. The whole question of an effective new media strategy becomes significantly more complex on an international scale when cultural differences matter.

If we learned anything from the campaign, it is that we have to listen to what our counterparts are trying to tell us and we have to respond and adapt in real time. That can be a tremendous challenge in a slow moving and instinctively cautious bureaucracy. The medium may be interactive but it ceases to be so the second one side stops actively listening. We must, just as the President did during campaign, give our people the freedom to experiment and push the boundaries of how these technologies are employed. Here in Canberra and in other levels of the US government we are prepared to do that.

Ultimately, new media will not replace all other forms of communication—it will simply replace those where it is superior. But the balance between different methods will change, and we’ll need to look for ways to combine them. I still find face-to-face communication to be one of the best ways to engage with people. So I’d like to extend a hand across the divide, and I will randomly invite one of our followers on Twitter—we’re @USAembassyinOZ—to come to visit with me in my office at the Embassy for an in person chat. There is some immediacy with new media, so I’ll have to put a deadline on this offer: let’s say tomorrow at noon. I look forward to our continued conversation either through new media or just the old fashioned way—sitting across from one another and exchanging ideas.

Thank you.