

Nov 04, 2016 by **Monroe E. Price**

Transformative Mobilization: From Obama's Campaign Techniques to Public Diplomacy ^[1]

It may be peculiar to comment on one's own blog. But, having just provided a post on possible directions for Obama's international broadcasting and public diplomacy strategy, I realized I had missed the elephant (or donkey) in the room.

In thinking about a strategy for the new administration, the obvious question (so obvious that it's already three-quarters asked) is: what would it mean to harness, for global understanding, the Obama campaign's approach to "movement" thinking and its brilliant exploitation of the potential of the Internet?

International broadcasters have been struggling with the question of how to adjust to new technology. But often, it's like a gaggle of geezers trying to figure out how to use TiVo. There are important steps, papers, conferences, tests, modifications, and adjustments, but it's not clear there has been a visionary breakthrough.

The Obama team is pretty clearly sitting on some global version of the kind of organization, energy, and understanding of technology that has extraordinary potential. It netted him those hundreds of millions in contributions but-- more important for public diplomacy-- that mother lode of emotive connection.

The issue is how to bottle this, how to turn it to constructive mobilization, and use it as a way of changing dramatically the Manichean narratives out there in the world. Billions seem to want to be connected; they are shouting it from the rooftops.

I reiterate, I'm not saying this search for innovation as savior is new. James Glassman, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, has vaunted the move to new technology and the Internet. Daniel Kimmage of Radio Free Europe wrote a *New York Times* op-ed last June, in which he argued (maybe a bit too triumphantly) that the U.S. was already playing with Web 2.0 while Al Qaeda was still in 1.0. This may be, but (without being too adulatory) the Obama campaign has been on the Web on steroids.

How can this energy be captured? How can public diplomacy in a web world contribute to building a collaborative community, a mass that sees itself committed to a common theme of repair or restoration rather than a set of efforts "aimed at" particular audiences?

This use of technology is far more personal, more engaged, and more persevering. But, it involves a total rethinking, restaffing, and reinvention of public diplomacy and with it a transformation of international broadcasting.

This is not captured by "bottom-up" or user generated content; it's got some quality of what

William Rugh (former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen and the U.A.E) calls mobilization, oddly enough. It departs from the paradigms of the past. How it works— how it worked in the campaign— is something that is elusive.

A random blog about the Obama campaign (written at a middle stage in the campaigning marathon) captures something of the spirit:

E.politics has long preached the virtues of integrated online/offline communications , and it's fascinating to see a major campaign with big resources put the idea into action and really go beyond the basics. I have no special insight into the Obama campaign, just the same public information we all have access to, but the sense I get is that these folks are really using the web rather than just throwing things online.

Jamie Metzl, now at the Asia Society, was prescient when writing about this almost a decade ago reflecting experience in the Clinton years:

The new vision must see foreign policy less as an interaction between government elites and more as a multifaceted interaction between societies, in which governments, among other actors, play an important role in shaping dialogue and moving towards desired outcomes through diffuse exchanges on a number of levels.

Metzl recognized that even in the new world “governments will...have policies, engage with foreign leaders, move armies, (and) negotiate international treaties. But:

(E)very one of these traditional government functions... will need to be developed in consideration of international public opinion and a more broadly defined international context, and presented in a form and manner that utilizes whatever media best reaches the target audiences. Policies will have to be carefully and proactively explained to foreign populations through satellite television and radio, the Internet, and other media using techniques that make the information presented interesting and appealing.

The Obama campaign has turned this notion of Metzl's from a useful prediction to a more sweeping and compelling reality.
