Open Source Campaigning: Efficiency or Empowerment?

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Is the Internet making the US Presidential race a more open and democratic contest? Can the rest of us learn any lessons from American's use of political blogs, email, social networking and websites? Tim Watts is Polis' pet spin-doctor (sorry – political communications expert) and he's been at the Personal Democracy conference in New York.

Before he went I gave Tim two questions to put to the participants about whether the Internet really is more democratic:

> *1. Tell me in concrete terms what the new technology has allowed you to do that is significantly different in political terms from before? Not just being faster, more connected, more responsive. Tell me what difference it has made, if any, in policy outcomes and the distribution of power?*
>
> *2. Is this just an American thing? Is it because US politics was so sterile, so locked up by lobbyists and big money and ideological stasis? or can new technology unleash new democratic forces in other countries?*

Tim has now blogged about his impressions of the conference and he has also been bold enough to try to answer my queries.

Barrack Obama's camapign has been touted as a harbinger of a new kind of digitally democratic politics but Tim points out that many of the delegates were already disillusioned:

> *In fact, the general view amongst participants was that while Barack Obama has the most open and decentralised organisation of any campaign in history, strategy, policy making and message development remained extremely tightly controlled by the campaign team. Many of the working journalists at the conference have noted that Obama was by far the least accessible candidate for media inquiries. Similarly, on the only policy issue when the campaign head quarters and the decentralised Obama organisation have violently disagreed, the decision to opt out of Federal campaign funding, campaign headquarters announced a decision on the issue with next to no formal consultation with the organisational base.*

The optimistic case is that people outside the campaign HQs and the media have had more impact. Take Mayhill Fowler for example. The fact that Obama has fewer big corporate funders relative to his grass-root (or net-root) supporters makes a more open campaign likely. And finally, by allowing more people to be involved at different levels in the campaign he has allowed the possibility that people may have more engagement and oversight of his presidency (if he beats McCain…).

It's hardly revolutionary. But an opportunity for democratic shift is better than none. This is Tim's conclusion:

> *Ultimately however, the general agreement at this conference is that while ICT has enabled political campaigners to implement a panoply of innovative campaign tactics and strategies, the impact of these new strategies has been less about citizen empowerment and more about campaigning*

> *efficiency.*