

---

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

### BO, U R So Gr8 --- How a young tech entrepreneur translated Barack Obama into the idiom of Facebook

By Amy Schatz  
2,588 words  
26 May 2007  
The Wall Street Journal  
A1  
English  
(Copyright (c) 2007, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

Chicago -- In a corner of a spacious, spare, window-lined office overlooking Michigan Ave., Chris Hughes is surfing the future of political campaigning. Tapping on his laptop, the sandy-haired 23-year-old scans emails, helps moderate disputes among on-line backers and consults outside bloggers on how to bolster presidential candidate Barack Obama's Internet site. More than 65,000 people have now registered on the site (dubbed MyBO by campaign staff) and Mr. Hughes is part of a team that's trying to figure out how to get them more deeply involved in the Illinois senator's presidential campaign.

About 5,000 groups of Obama supporters now use online tools to create their own events and fundraisers around the country. Two weeks ago, 700 people in New York registered for a walk-a-thon that raised at least \$5,000 for Mr. Obama's campaign; a much larger national "walk for change" is now being organized online. No concern is too small. In April, Mr. Hughes helped arrange the logistics for bulk T-shirt sales for several Internet groups hoping to sell them at their informal fundraisers.

Three years ago Mr. Hughes was a Harvard sophomore, sitting in a dorm room helping develop what would become Facebook Inc. the popular social-networking site, with two roommates. After he graduated last June, he moved to Silicon Valley to work on Facebook full-time. But five months ago he put his career on hold to move to Chicago, in the dead of winter, for a "significant" pay-cut, in favor of a 14-hour-a-day job with Mr. Obama's campaign. His goal: to transfer the same magic that transformed the way college students interact to a presidential campaign.

Facebook, MySpace and other social-networking sites allow people to create home-page hangouts and use them to connect with their friends online. People create pages for themselves on these sites that show their name, photos of themselves, contact information and other personal details. They can also message each other, meet friends of friends, chat on message boards and discover new bands. The sites are among the fastest growing corners of the Internet -- social-networking sites drew more than 111 million unique visitors in April, according to research firm comScore Inc.

Now social networking is shaping up as a potent new force in the 2008 presidential campaign. Candidates are betting that the sites -- existing commercial ones or their own newly created ones, like Mr. Hughes's My.BarackObama.com -- will expand their power to find and mobilize supporters, particularly elusive **young** voters who go to the polls at much lower rates than their elders.

The Obama, John Edwards and John McCain campaigns say they have already seen social networking help broaden their base of contributors to thousands of people who may only give \$50 or \$100 at a time, but can be pinged later for more money. Mr. Obama's striking fundraising success to date has been driven in part by the user-friendly methods his Web site has developed, not just for collecting donations, but for allowing fans to establish their own fundraising events. The donation page looks like the checkout page on Amazon.com. About a quarter of Mr. Obama's \$25 million first-quarter haul came via the Internet from more than 50,000 donors.

At the forefront of this new experiment in political social networking are **young** people like Mr. Hughes. Nineteen-year-old George Stern, the head of former North Carolina senator John Edwards social network, One Corps, is so **young** he'll be voting in his first presidential election next year. But the same forces that give social networking such organizing value -- giving thousands of volunteers the power to blitz each other with information and cook up plans -- can create new conflicts in a campaign. The tight, message-control instincts of a political organization don't mesh easily with the chaotic, free-form creativity of the Internet. Even the tech-savvy Obama campaign discovered that earlier this month, when officials clashed with the volunteer running Mr. Obama's MySpace page. Another Internet-focused candidate, Mr. Edwards, ran into trouble when bloggers on his staff posted incendiary comments on their personal blogs about anti-abortion Catholics and religious conservatives, leading to their resignation.

Skeptics also wonder if the Internet can really translate into votes. In 2004, former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's presidential campaign won plaudits for its online network, but failed to translate that into an effective on-the-ground campaign structure in Iowa, where it collapsed.

Mr. Hughes grew up in Hickory, N.C., but says he felt out of place in his socially conservative hometown, and began plotting his escape during his freshman year of high school. He began applying to boarding schools even though his father, a paper salesman, couldn't afford the tuition, he says. Mr. Hughes was accepted at Phillips Academy and, despite his parents' misgivings, moved to Andover, Mass. at the age of 14, for his sophomore year of high school.

"That was the hardest year of my life," Mr. Hughes recalls. Armed with ambition, a financial-aid package and a thick southern accent, Mr. Hughes says he slowly began to find his way at the elite prep school.

His accent disappeared. He began to get involved in politics, becoming president of the school's chapter of **Young Democrats**. He knocked on doors for presidential candidate Al Gore in 2000. When he graduated, he was accepted at Harvard University.

During his sophomore year at Harvard, one of his roommates, Mark Zuckerberg, began obsessively writing software for a new Internet site in the common room of their Kirkland House dorm suite. The site replicated online the university-produced yearbooks that help students meet each other. On Facebook, students could create a personal Web profile page with photos and favorite books and movies, and share all that with anybody else with a Harvard email address.

Mr. Hughes didn't write code. He majored in history and literature at Harvard, specializing in French social and political theory. Instead, he helped design many of Facebook's features and privacy policies including the ability to "poke" -- a wordless online tap designed to get another user's attention.

When his two roommates and co-founders moved to Palo Alto, Calif. to focus on Facebook full-time shortly after the site took off, Mr. Hughes remained in school. A meticulous dresser -- his more rumpled co-founders tease him about looking "Prada" -- he became the company's spokesman. He also helped with product development via phone, email and occasional West Coast visits between classes. He joined them in the summers, working at Facebook and living with them in a shared house.

After graduating from college a year ago, Mr. Hughes moved to Palo Alto to work on product development full time at Facebook. During the 2006 campaign, Mr. Obama wasn't running yet, but his staff decided to take advantage of the growing interest in him among **young** people and wanted to set up a profile for him on Facebook. Mr. Obama's Senate Internet director, Jim Brayton, emailed Facebook's support team for help and Mr. Hughes responded.

Mr. Hughes quickly helped the Obama camp set up an official profile on Facebook. It included photos of Mr. Obama, information about his favorite musicians (John Coltrane, Stevie Wonder) and movies ("The Godfather" I and II, "Casablanca") -- and almost immediately drew messages of support from other Facebook users. "Run for president! Save us!" wrote Alex Sheperd, a University of Missouri student, in the first message on Mr. Obama's page.

Four months later, Mr. Obama announced his candidacy. Mr. Hughes, who had stayed in touch with Mr. Brayton, called to see how he could help.

Mr. Hughes was hired after an interview over coffee at Washington D.C.'s Union Station. "I asked him about some of his ideas," for the Web site, Mr. Brayton says. "He basically went on for an hour." Mr. Hughes won't disclose his salary. He has taken a leave from closely-held Facebook but says he retains an ownership stake and stock options.

All of the presidential campaigns have tiptoed into the social-networking waters this year by putting up profiles on MySpace, Facebook and other commercial sites, hoping to get themselves in front of potential voters. But most are largely passive efforts, putting up pages on existing commercial sites, which impose limits on how candidates can use them. Facebook privacy policies, for example, restrict campaigns from sending blast emails to groups. Facebook also doesn't provide detailed contact or demographic information about users. Mr. Hughes knows those restrictions well -- he was, among other things, in charge of helping craft them.

Several candidates have taken the step of actively developing their own social networks -- Mr. Obama, Mr. Edwards and, to a lesser extent, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republican Sen. McCain of Arizona -- in hopes of sparking online support that can be translated into real-world donations and volunteerism. McCainSpace allows people to create home pages inside Mr. McCain's Web site so they can recruit other people for his team and raise money. In February, Mr. McCain's Web site attracted some 226,000 unique visitors, according to Nielsen/Net Ratings, making it the most viewed Republican campaign site. But that still lagged far behind Mr. Obama, the Democratic leader, who

logged 773,000 unique visitors.

What the Obama campaign wanted wasn't a Facebook clone; the goal is political action, not socializing. The campaign launched its social-networking site using off-the-shelf software but has been tweaking it ever since. For now, the software limits Obama supporters to posting just one personal photo of themselves and other limited biographical information, such as their hometown or a favorite quote. It doesn't allow them to post information on their favorite movies or books.

But a "resource center" offers everything from downloadable flyers to broadband videos of Obama speeches and commercials with instructions on how to turn them into DVDs. The site's fundraising section allows supporters to set a fundraising goal and invite registered "friends" to help them reach it -- with a United Way-style thermometer of how close a person is to his target and a one-paragraph e-mail pitch to send to potential donors.

Mr. Obama's site is designed to help like-minded supporters across the country come together to generate new financial support, share ideas and ways of volunteering.

The heart of MyBO is the "groups" section, where people create or join online groups that share blogs, ideas, and organize events and fundraisers together. Groups are generally organized by geography ("Sonoma County for Obama;" "Midcoast Maine for Obama,"), interests ("Educators for Obama") or common goals ("Quit Smoking for Obama"). The groups contain a mixture of long-time Democratic activists who've volunteered for campaigns as well as neophytes who say they have never been interested in getting involved in politics until now.

The campaign's embrace of Internet activism and the downside of giving up total control became clear earlier this year during a public fight between the Obama camp and one of its most enthusiastic volunteers.

Joe Anthony, a 29-year-old Los Angeles paralegal, launched a MySpace page three years ago when Mr. Obama was first elected to the Senate. It mostly contained biographical information about Mr. Obama and a few photos, but it attracted thousands of friends over the years. When Mr. Obama launched his campaign traffic to the site took off and Mr. Anthony was contacted by Mr. Hughes about how the campaign could help with the site. But as traffic to the site skyrocketed to 160,000 "friends" by April, campaign staffers started worrying about the quasi-independent site.

The campaign became concerned about liability issues, and whether Mr. Anthony's efforts could run afoul of Federal Election Commission rules, which set limits on "in-kind" contributions as well as money. They also raised political concerns: "What if someone put up an obscene comment during the day while Joe was at work?" a campaign official wrote in one blog. Obama officials decided they needed to run the site themselves. Talks with Mr. Anthony about how to hand over the site fell apart. The campaign contacted MySpace, which killed Mr. Anthony's Obama page on April 29.

The result: Mr. Obama lost the network of 160,000 "friends" Mr. Anthony had built up. That figure has since grown back to more than 73,500 who have joined the site since Mr. Obama's Internet team relaunched it. Many online activists complained one of their own had been betrayed and Mr. Anthony withdrew his support for Mr. Obama. "We're not a list of names and we're not inexpensive advertising," Mr. Anthony wrote on his MySpace blog. "We are exactly the ordinary people you speak of, using the Internet to attempt to change the world."

These days, Mr. Hughes shows up for work each day around 9 a.m. He says he won't leave the office until 11 p.m. He often eats at the Sbarro in the basement of the office building.

At first, Mr. Hughes mostly answered email questions and dispensed advice to MyBO members. He personally joined 67 of the largest and most active groups, scanning emails members send out to each other.

He began getting so many emails -- hundreds a day -- that the campaign assigned another staffer to help out. He now spends more of his time helping plan new features that can be added to MyBO, like a new interactive map that shows where supporters are gathering for Mr. Obama during his national "Walk for Change" event.

Some tech-savvy Obama supporters grumble about limitations of the official site. The blog section on My.BarackObama.com, for example, doesn't allow users to post YouTube videos, for example, or photos or audio files, like MP3s. It's also hard for other bloggers to use search engines like Technorati.com, to discover what people on My.BarackObama.com are posting.

Mr. Hughes and other members of Mr. Obama's Internet team acknowledge their site has limitations and they're working to address them. They're advertising for Web developers and say they have a list of at least

a dozen things to do to improve the site.

A new Obama feature launched on Friday allows Facebook users to add a window to their site that shows an Obama video, tells them how many of their registered "friends" support Obama and urges them to encourage friends who live in early primary states like New Hampshire and Iowa to join his cause.

Mr. Hughes's enthusiasm is being tempered by the experiences of others on Mr. Obama's staff, including his boss, Internet director Joe Rospars. Mr. Rospars was a key Internet staffer for Mr. Dean's campaign and remains focused on ensuring Mr. Obama does not meet the same fate as the former governor. The campaign has to remain focused on using technology as a means to reaching a campaign goal, he says. "We don't just do technology for technology's sake," says Mr. Rospars. "How does something help the campaign or help reach a campaign goal?"

[License this article from Dow Jones Reprint Service](#)

Document J000000020070526e35q0001n