

Kelly Brownell:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Policy 360. I am Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm very pleased to welcome Macon Phillips to the studio. Macon served as the digital guru for Barack Obama's campaign in 2008, and since then has been behind many of the Obama White House digital innovations. In September of 2013, United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, hired Macon Phillips as the head of the Bureau of International Information Programs in order to spearhead the overhaul of America's digital diplomacy efforts. Macon's worked on campaigns for federal and state legislative races, and among Macon's outstanding accomplishments is a degree in sociology from Duke University. Macon, welcome.

Macon Phillips:

Thank you. It's wonderful to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

There's so much to talk to you about, but let's begin with this. The Obama campaign was known for engaging citizens, and I know you were a big part, especially around innovation, development and innovations for doing that. How did you go about engaging citizens?

Macon Phillips:

Well, the campaign focused on three core functions, which is how we could communicate, how we could raise money, and how we could contact voters and make sure they turned out to vote. Technology had a profound impact in all three of those functions and continues to drive a lot of change. Obviously in communications, it was social media as a way of putting out content, it was the pace of how stories moved, it was the very nature of content itself and that people could create their own videos, their own arguments. We, I think, found some of the most exciting opportunity in really curating and facilitating and encouraging that kind of grassroots content development.

When it came to fundraising, I mean, a lot's been written about just the incredible impact that small dollar donations have on campaigns. I think we're already seeing that again in the current primary season. Being able to bring in a whole new source of revenue, but more than the actual dollars, actually have a lot of people have that kind of relationship with a campaign and feel like they could contribute what they could have certainly had a profound impact.

Then finally, in terms of field, I think that's really where a lot of the unsung heroes worked, in terms of integrating data and field and making sure that the campaign maximized the value of every dollar contributed and the time of every volunteer spent on the areas that really mattered for the campaign's overall outcome, which was getting more votes than the other campaign.

I should point out, you had a very kind introduction and being called a guru of anything is a little bit maybe unfair praise in some sense, but I was part of a team of a hundred people in Chicago. I was the deputy director of that department and was part of a very special moment in time I think, in 2008, where we did a lot of things for the first time. I was at the White House in 2012, where I got to watch very closely that campaign team take it to the next level. One of the most gratifying parts about my experience has been seeing that work continue and be built upon, not just by democratic campaigns, but overall in the political space, because getting more people involved in the process can't be a bad thing.

Kelly Brownell:

You used several terms that caught my attention and I'd like to hear you explain them in a little more detail, if you would. You mentioned integrating campaign and the field, what do you mean by that?

Macon Phillips:

Data and field, maybe I misspoke. I think that there's a tendency to think about the innovation of Barack Obama the politician as someone who used social media effectively and in ways that that had never been done before, but it's important to actually look at Barack Obama the person and what his origin experiences were in politics, which was working on the south side of Chicago, walking around neighborhoods, knocking on doors. If you talk to anyone who knows anything about presidential politics, they'll tell you that boots on the ground, walking around neighborhoods, knocking on doors is an incredibly essential part of campaigning.

I think it's unfair to segregate digital from the rest of the campaign as this other way that we did the work. Really where data and digital had a profound impact was looking at all the signals coming in through polling or other kinds of sources and helping direct the resources, whether that's for ads or whether that's for volunteers who were out canvassing neighborhoods, into the areas that really matter. That's not something I think that's seen publicly, but it's certainly something that has a measured impact on the enterprise of the campaign itself.

Again, I've been able to see that happen. I was not part of that on the '12 campaign, but I certainly think that some of the people that came out of that, Joe Rospars, Dan Wagner, a bunch of different people who pushed a lot of innovation there, are some of the most interesting stories in politics right now.

Kelly Brownell:

You also mentioned grassroots content development, can you give an example of what you mean by that?

Macon Phillips:

Yeah. I mean, I think that if you just look in the political space, even right now, there's this explosion of memes and videos and ways people are talking about why they support certain candidates that the campaigns have no role in creating. To some extent, they can embrace it. I think you may remember the Hillary phone call image from a while back, of her on a plane on a cell phone, and how that started a conversation about who she was and the kind of leader she was. Eventually, she actually, her people, stepped into that and engaged on it. But for a long time, that was something that was very organic, but still very powerful and aligned with her interests. You're seeing that for basically every candidate out there, some level of it.

For Obama, that's always been something I think that we've enjoyed, that people have responded to what he's doing because they share his interests and they want to talk about that. We also have deliberately engaged in that, both on the campaign, but also the White House, by inviting content creators into the White House, whether they're popular people on YouTube who are creating videos to talk about the president's policies after the State of The Union, or whether they're popular people on Instagram to walk around the White House and take photos of it. At the end of the day, you can really get your message across, oftentimes more effectively, by identifying the best messengers for that and just giving them the information.

Kelly Brownell:

So you could see cases where people are attempting to be helpful, but would create content that turns out not to be. How would you respond to that?

Macon Phillips:

I think it's default open, it's default more participation in the better. The bigger question is this illusion that you could actually control what people are putting out. The biggest shift, I think for me, for communications, from a communication standpoint, has been from the centralized model of the nightly newscast and the front page of the newspaper really defining the news of the day and the White House's press operation, or really any institution's press operation, being oriented around influencing those few moments to one of constant dialogue, where you are no longer able to really control or affect the people who control that and you're more just participating in an ongoing conversation. In that sense, you just do the best you can to make sure the people who share your interests are as informed as they can be, and then you accept a little bit of flex in terms of how they're going to choose to present that.

When we're talking about things like talking to young people about healthcare insurance, bringing Zach Galifianakis into the White House, which happened just after I left the White House, was a great example of content being created that you would never see the White House on its own choose to do, but it ended up being a terribly funny and an effective piece of content because of his sensibility, and ultimately, really effective at reaching the target audience the White House wanted to reach.

Kelly Brownell:

Given that you were so involved in the 2008 and 2012 campaigns, are there advances that have occurred since that time that are being used in the current campaigns?

Macon Phillips:

Yeah. I have to say, I have not followed the political campaigns as closely this time as I did in '12, perhaps to some extent because the '12 campaign was existential question for me and my own job at the White House. Though, I think it's fairly clear that there are still some technologies that have been refined more and more, namely the use of email I think is an overlooked one. People are always looking for the next thing, but in truth, technologies like that continue to be really effective in terms of fundraising and taking advantage of certain moments.

But I think it really does seem to be pretty similar to '12 in terms of communications, though I think that the point I made earlier about the impact of data on how resources are prioritized is surely much more sophisticated, but isn't a story that's known as publicly until the after action reports are being written. So we'll see.

Kelly Brownell:

You were very involved in creating something quite innovative at the White House, we the people. 16 million users have signed over 400,000 petitions. Where did the idea come from and how did it develop?

Macon Phillips:

Well, I think the idea of petitions have been around a little bit longer than I have. That's something that is a pretty core instrument of democracy, precisely because democracies are organized to be responsive to what a lot of people care about and that was basically the problem that we wanted to solve. For the White House, it was really important that if a lot of people cared about an issue, there was an efficient

way for us to engage in that issue. As someone who worked in political organizing and advocacy during the Bush administration on the outside, I ran a lot of petition campaigns. I even took petitions to the White House and gave them the Secret Service officer, who was pretty clear where that box of petitions was going, and that didn't feel like a real valid citizen interaction.

We first got oriented within the White House, figured out where the bathrooms were, how everything worked, and then after a year or two started this project of developing a platform for public engagement. The basic way the system works is anyone can create a petition. The only rule is that it has to be on a possible federal government action. If the petition gathers enough signatures, the White House has to respond. They don't have to do it, but they have to respond. We started off by saying you have to get at least 5,000 signatures, that really felt like a good number. That was way low. In the first few days, it was very clear that we needed to raise that number. Then we went to 25,000 and now it's 100,000, because as you mentioned, the participation has been far greater than I expected. I think we have over 30 million signatures now, we've responded to over 200 petitions.

A lot of those petitions are basically, "No, we don't agree with that policy. We don't think we should legalize online poker. We don't, whatever, want to do the thing that you want to do, but here's why." But the really part about the petitions project, to me, is we ask people to complete a survey about their experience with the petitions. We see a pretty good response rate with that survey. As I mentioned, oftentimes we're saying no, in some pleasant way, but we're explaining why. We see about 50% of people reply and say that they learned something new, and even more say they would use the system again.

I think in a day, in an age where you're seeing people more polarized, you're not seeing as much debate and dialogue between people who disagree with one another, for there to be a petition about gun control and the president to say, "I believe in the Second Amendment, but here's the ways I think we need to address this issue," for us to get past the simplification of the president wants to take away my guns or whatever and actually move the ball forward on this issue, I think that's really meaningful and that's probably why I'm most proud of the petitions platform.

Kelly Brownell:

It sounds like a wonderful way to get people more engaged in their democracy, here's a mechanism for them to have a voice to support what they feel is important. I'm wondering whether there were surprising things that came along that you weren't anticipating through that process?

Macon Phillips:

For sure. I mean, on the one hand, it's the basic rule of go where people already are, find that energy already. It's not like we had to teach people what petitions were or convince them to organize around it. I think we were able to look at that energy and say we could actually improve it, there's a problem in here that we think we could actually help solve, and we were able to tap into that.

There were a lot of ways, I think the two categories, one is the rate of international adoption, so it's that anyone can create a petition. We see people around the world using this, oftentimes saying the United States needs to weigh in on this issue or this election just happened, the State Department should speak out. As someone who's been in the State Department for the last two years, I'm now realizing just how profound that kind of citizen engagement is in some countries, how profoundly different it is than the status quo. I think that's one area of real exciting promise.

The other is, of course, people being clever and funny with it. One of the petitions that the system's best known for is that the US government should build a Death Star, that the president should

call the Department of Defense and tell them to build a Death Star, which we answered and said that would be a real waste of taxpayer money to build a giant fortress that could be destroyed by a single Starfighter with one shot, but we were also able to use it to pivot into all the ways that the DoD and NASA is investing in space research.

One of the measurable impacts of that petition is we referred to a program deep inside NASA called Spot the Station. You can sign up, and at night, when the space station is above you, you can take your kids out, look up and see the thing blinking in the sky. They'll send you a text message based on where you tell it you live. The few days after we sent that petition out, we had 10,000 sign-ups. I like to think that there's families that are going out and looking at the space station, because at some point Dad signed a Death Star petition, and I'll take that.

Kelly Brownell:

It's a very interesting outcome. Let's talk about your work in the State Department now. Can you explain what you're doing and then how digital technology plays into matters of the Department of State and diplomacy issues?

Macon Phillips:

Sure. At the State Department, I manage a bureau called the Bureau of International Information Programs. We're part of the public diplomacy family of bureaus and resources. At very core, we support our embassies around the world who are engaging foreign audiences to advance policy priorities, which is a pretty simple way of putting it. What the impact of digital means is that as connection technologies are growing and becoming more pervasive around the world, it's having a real impact on power in societies, on how actually governments work. Certainly, it's the same here in the United States, if you just look at how public policy conversations have changed over the last 20 years.

For the State Department, that's presenting a lot of new questions and opportunities about who we engage with, around which issues. It's not simply about telling America's story and explaining our system of government, it's also finding non-government actors who care a lot about climate change and figuring out how we can work with them on the issues they have. It's looking at the subnational level of leaders and organizers and making sure that we have a relationship with them. It's finding areas of shared interest and informing them with the variety of resources we have, including speakers that we bring, just Americans who are experts on different issues, but also training them and listening to them about what their issues are.

It's a whole new area of engagement and having been there for two years, I think it's something that the State Department is changing and adapting towards, but has a lot of work to do. It's a big institution, but the leadership there, certainly the secretary and all the way down to frontline workers, recognize this new opportunity. I've been able to be part of that change for two years. I think the change will continue after I'm gone, but it's been really exciting.

Kelly Brownell:

Let me end with the following question. You are deeply involved in innovation and thinking about what will lie ahead in the future. I can only imagine the number of new ideas that come your way. How do you sort through the ideas and decide what is a keeper and what isn't going to fly, and how do you make those judgment calls?

Macon Phillips:

I'll say it's much more difficult to do that in my current job than it was on the campaign, because the most important factor and the simple answer to your question is to always be conscious of your objective in the first place. When you are working as a consultant for a company or for an advocacy group that wants to raise money, that's a pretty easy objective to understand. When you're working on a campaign, the objective's pretty clear, it's we win or we lose and there's a path to victory. That means all of your choices are based on key questions. Will this help me raise money? Will this help me get volunteers out? Can we knock on the right doors?

Now you come to the government and there are still, I think, clear goals, many times. Healthcare enrollment is a good example, where you can justify out-of-the-box thinking and new ideas, like engaging the Zach Galifianakis type or that sort of thing. But other times, you're just responding to crises and hoping that you can use the effective ways to get your message out, but it's hard to measure your effectiveness and so sometimes you have to come up with what you think those are. But ultimately, as you're evaluating all these new technologies, whether they're live streaming platforms like Periscope or Meerkat, or whether they're new messaging things like WhatsApp or Snapchat or whatever, it's very clear or it's very important, and this is perhaps I think the area that I've been able to help with the most, to try to stay consistent on what your objectives are in the first place. If these things seem like they'll help you achieve that objective, then you take a risk and you try. But if you're not sure, I think that's when you need to be asking more questions about your objective in the first place.

Kelly Brownell:

Good. Well, thank you. This has been a fascinating discussion. I appreciate you joining us.

Macon Phillips:

Absolutely. It's a pleasure, and it's a pleasure to be back here at Duke. It's a shot in the arm, really exciting what's happening here on campus.

Kelly Brownell:

Thank you. Our guest today has been Macon Phillips, who is the coordinator of the US State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs. He is a Duke grad and is on campus as a guest of Polis, the Center for Politics, Leadership, Innovation, and Service, a new center at the Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. Thanks for listening.