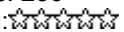


Government

Presidents and Technology
By [Dennis McCafferty](#)
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A short history of White House tech.

Now that President Barack Obama is settling into the White House, how connected — from an IT perspective - will he remain? During his run for the presidency, Obama was clearly a tech-savvy campaigner, who used e-mail and innovative Web 2.0 technologies to stay in touch with his staff and supporters.

However, the new president is likely to face a severe sense of withdrawal as he begins working in the Oval Office.

For starters, everyone knows that he must ditch his beloved BlackBerry because of security concerns. But that may be only the start of his disconnect, experts say.

“From the earliest days, presidential enthusiasm for communication and information has been weighed against concerns about security—whether that meant fear of fire in the 19th century or espionage in the days before Pearl Harbor,” says Christopher Capozzola, an associate professor of history at MIT who specializes in modern American political history. “So while Obama promises a ‘White House 2.0’—and the people serving him may end up using the most advanced security and encryption technologies—Obama himself will probably spend most of his days using the oldest communication ‘technology’ in the book: face-to-face conversation.”

Through the decades, presidents have maintained an on-again/off-again relationship with technology. In 1924, Calvin Coolidge’s photographic image was transmitted from New York to London by an early incarnation of the fax machine. Lyndon Johnson was the epitome of the multimediamatching, multitasking pro: He used multiple TV screens in his office to monitor the news while working several phones at a time. And Nixon had his infamous taping system.












But ironically, even as the world’s private sector has arguably made the most significant advances in IT — beginning with the Internet boom of the 1990s — our nation’s chief executives have pretty much remained on the sidelines.

Sure, Clinton launched the first official Web site for the White House. But he was hardly hands-on. “He had the enthusiasm for technology, but he hardly used it,” says Capozzola. “Clinton liked his legal pads.”

The most recent Bush administration was among the most connected, especially when it came to e-mail. Unfortunately, the controversy over a reported 5 million e-mails lost between 2003 and 2005 cast a dark shadow over this practice, especially after public interest groups filed suit over the losses. By the end of his second term, Bush had stopped using e-mail. “Bush closed his e-mail account,” Capozzola says. “He had no computer at the end of his administration, even though his father did.”

While Obama may be handcuffed with respect to his personal use of technology, he’ll still aggressively pursue the benefits of technology when it comes to getting his message out—resorting to more beyond-the-mainstream media outlets than any other president.

“Both Obama and his supporters changed the way technology is used in a political campaign,” says Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a professor of marketing at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. “He embraced the era of Web 2.0: YouTube was flooded with pro-Obama video clips produced by his fans. Social networking sites were filled with people proclaiming their support of his candidacy. Meetup was used to organize his base in local communities and promote voter registration drives. Twitter was used to send text messages about relevant events.

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"Using the Internet, Obama will continue to be less reliant on the mainstream media to get his message out. More importantly, his administration will continue to use Web 2.0 tools to engage the public, solicit their ideas and rally their support."

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