

Obama revolutionizing Oval Office Internet use

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WASHINGTON, D.C.— Newell Deman's dorm room is devoid of a TV, DVDs, magazines, CDs, books or newspapers.

Instead of tangible media types, Deman now exclusively uses his Lenovo ThinkPad X300 laptop with Wi-Fi Internet access. From there he listens to music, studies, reads online books, watches basketball games and follows local and national politics.

"I didn't watch CNN or FOX News once (during) this election," said Deman, a junior studying speech and hearing sciences at George Washington University. "And if Barack Obama brings new technology to the White House, I will not have to resort back to television and radio to follow the president."

With only an inaugural oath separating President-elect Obama from the White House, Deman and other tech-savvy students are growing curious about Obama's technology plans. They, as well as media experts, are especially curious about how Obama will use the Internet once he is in office.

The senator from Illinois established a reputation for great online political organizing, said Julia Germany, the director of the Institute of Politics, Democracy and the Internet at GW.

"The Obama campaign outfundraised the McCain campaign online and did a phenomenal job of using the Internet to organize volunteers and supporters," Germany said.

Trudi Bronnen, a sophomore in women's studies at GW, said Obama's use of the Internet was one of the reasons she voted for him.

"It seemed as if he used the Internet not only to get his message out there, but also to get more feedback from those (who) were listening," she said. "I guess it suggested openness and that he would be that way as president."

Erin Petzer, a freshman in classical studies at GW, did not vote because she did not register in time but said she and her friends have talked about how well the Obama campaign was organized.

"A few of us had signed up to get his e-mails. Some of us were getting four to five e-mails a day from the campaign," Petzer said. "It motivated us to send e-mails and text messages to our friends to spread the word."

Germany said Obama used the Internet as the central nervous system of the campaign.

"The Internet makes everything the campaign does, from fundraising to volunteers to get-out-the-vote run more efficiently and more effectively," she said.

Germany and IPDI hope Obama and his administration will continue to use the Internet to make the executive office more transparent and effective. The IPDI Web site recently made recommendations for the Obama technology team, including having weekly Web casts by cabinet members and putting the president's budget online in a user-friendly format.

IPDI and other media groups are also encouraging the administration to enact legislation that would require future presidents to continue the traditions of technology improvements and openness.

The Obama administration has already created a new Web page, www.change.gov, and broadcast the first weekly presidential address through Web video. Previously, the weekly address was broadcast through radio only.

"I saw Obama's first address on YouTube and decided to watch it," said Morgan Cross, a sophomore in dance at GW. "I never knew that the president addressed the country once a week, but now that it is on the Internet, I think I will watch it more often."

In Obama's first address, he spoke about the failing economy and his plans to help it recover, focusing on a need to help those without unemployment insurance. It already has nearly one million views on YouTube and will be updated weekly.

Obama also hopes to be the first president to use a laptop in the Oval Office and have Internet access there, aides told reporters last week. But Obama is likely to give up his BlackBerry mobile phone and his e-mail address when he takes office because of security measures and the Presidential Records Act, which places all presidential correspondence on the official record and up for public record.

"He is the president of the United States. What he says needs to be confidential," Bryce Overby, a senior in sociology at GW, said. "The Internet is too unstable and too easy to for others to access, I think. Plus he has tons of aides that can e-mail and make phone calls for him."

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Editor's Note—Jed Layton is reporting from Washington, D.C., through the Hinckley Institute of Politics.