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Data lags on Obama's stylish Web site

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It is a point of pride for the Obama administration that they are more technologically advanced than any previous White House, and they say they are using new media to open up government to regular Americans.

But while the five-month old Obama White House Web site has drawn rave reviews for its fresh design and innovation, several experts say it has not moved the White House toward being "the most open and transparent [administration] in history," as new media director Macon Phillips promised on day one.

Information is harder to find on the Obama Web site than it was on the site created and run by the Bush administration, according to Web site experts.

"It doesn't seem to be quite in line with the notion of the pillars of government 2.0 being openness and transparency. It seems just the opposite," said Mark Drapeau, a columnist for Federal Computer Week who writes frequently on the ways that new technologies can be used by the government.

Mr. Drapeau and others said this might be a short-term trend, as the administration has begun a long-term effort to use new technologies to open up the government that could have a big impact on the way the public interacts with the federal bureaucracy and keeps track of its actions.

The biggest difference is that the Bush Web site archived all its information by year, month and day, with a sidebar menu that allowed a user to view virtually all the information from, for

By providing technologies like
Electronic Medical Records,



example, a day in 2002 -- speech transcripts along with video and audio of the speech, press releases, official statements, nominations, letters to Congress, executive orders -- with three clicks of the mouse.

The same information on the Obama site, however, is spread across various parts of the Web site. The longer ago something happened, the harder it is to find.

"It's lots of PR and not a lot of data," said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, who called the site "brochureware."

One former White House Web director for the Bush administration called the overall experience "discombobulated."

"It is confusing to locate specific content and the structure is not intuitive," said David Almacy, a senior vice president for digital public affairs at Edelman.

Macon Phillips, Mr. Obama's director of new media and the man most responsible for the president's new Web site, said the site remains a "work in progress."

"I feel like we still have a lot to do," he said. "We're thinking a lot about how we can organize things in an accessible way."

They have made informational improvements in the last month, beefing up the "speeches and remarks" page to include just about every utterance that comes from the mouth of Mr. Obama, first lady Michelle Obama, or Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. The page, previously classified only as "speeches," had for months held only four or five transcripts.

The White House also is live streaming daily video of press briefings and other events on its site.

Mr. Phillips said that he and his team began their work on the site with an eye toward "information architecture" as their top priority.

"We wanted to make sure that material was laid out in a clear way. We didn't start with a design question in terms of what looks good," he said.

And if there's a theme among the biggest fans of Mr. Phillips' creation, it's that they all love the look and feel of the new whitehouse.gov. A handful of web designers interviewed by The Washington Times gave the site rave reviews and said it had far surpassed the Bush Web site.

But their markers for excellence are telling.

"The biggest difference is the imagery. There's a lot of President Obama during work hours at meetings and speeches and debates. This does a really good job of making it more personal," said Daniel Ritzenthaler, founder of Wurkit Web design.

"It looks like the Obama team is really concerned with making a more personal connection with people through the Web site as opposed to being a news source."

One of the most noteworthy marks of the site has been its use as a distribution point, and showcase, for the thousands of exclusive photos taken by Mr. Obama's personal photographers. The main page of Mr. Obama's Web site revolves around a large window that rotates between four photos, which are often flattering portraits of the president.

The White House has also created a Flickr.com account on the privately run, commercial Web site, and has posted hundreds of photos of the president, often showing him behind the scenes of his official events or during his private moments.

"Once we got here and saw ... what [chief White House photographer] Pete Souza and his team were producing it was a no-brainer to see how we could make that more accessible," Mr. Phillips said.

Brian Williams, CEO and co-founder of Viget Labs, a Web design company based in Falls Church, said that "the Bush site feels boxy, dated, clumsy, and generally lacking in style or real substance."

"It doesn't do a good job of pulling the user in to experience the site or learn from the content," he said. "The Obama site, on the other hand, projects confidence and openness. It feels more engaging, open, and current."

Stephen Anderson, a self-employed designer with over a decade of experience in creating "interactive experiences," said that the Bush Web site "felt more like a news site with lots of useful information spread throughout."

"This administration's version of whitehouse.gov has more in common with product or service sites -- there's a clear central message being communicated," Mr. Anderson said. "I'm impressed by the overall aesthetic."

These comments, however, only reinforce the idea that the Obama Web site does a better job of looking good and selling the Obama brand than it does of making information truly accessible.

Mr. Phillips pointed to the search function as a component of the Obama site that can be used to find information. That function has been vastly improved over the Bush Web site, but does not catch everything.

However, the Obama White House has launched a pair of initiatives aimed at delivering on their promises to be the most transparent administration ever. In his Jan. 21 memo, Mr. Obama instructed his budget director to issue, within 120 days, "specific actions" for each government agency to fulfill the principles of the Open Government Directive.

On May 21, the White House said essentially that they needed more time to come up with recommendations, and said they were "early in the process of creating recommendations." As part of this effort, the White House Office of Science and Technology has begun a dialogue with regular Americans seeking their input.

The White House has also launched data.gov, which is intended "to increase public access to high value, machine readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government."

"When people talk about government as a platform what many of them are talking about is having the raw information available in database format so we can decide how we want to look at it," Mr. Drapeau said.

Jimmy Orr, who ran the Bush Web site for that president's first term, said that "we have to cut the administration some slack."

"We've got to. They've been in office for five months now. I know, coming from start up to the first full term, it takes a while to get everything up and running," said Mr. Orr, who has helped the Christian Science Monitor move from a print product to an exclusively online news source.

"There appears to be a real commitment -- they're Internet focused, they get it, and I think the Web site will evolve into something very, very good.

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