



The Planet Goes BlackBerry

“When they go to work, people expect a phone, a desk, a chair, a light. And a BlackBerry has really taken on that status.”

—Mike Lazaridis

Mike Lazaridis’s little device is the favorite fruit of 25 million people across the planet who just can’t get along without their innovative electronic organizer. But a scarce ten years ago, the BlackBerry was known to only a few movers and shakers in Washington, on Wall Street or in big high-tech firms like Intel and IBM.

Back in 1999, Research In Motion (RIM) built the first reliable product to offer two-way mobile e-mail and messaging. At that time, pagers holstered on belts were part of the MD’s or Wall Street broker’s uniform. But they allowed only one-way communication. Lazaridis had realized that corporate technophiles wouldn’t want to be tethered to their computers and would, instead, love to work anywhere, sending and receiving e-mail directly on their pagers.

So, the BlackBerry easily won a favored spot on the belts of hard-charging political staffers and business professionals, from

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wireless warriors, out in the field and battling for market share, to cubicle cowboys lunching at their desks, hunched over BlackBerrys and juggling work and home.

Today, the BlackBerry monopolizes the world of work—nobody else comes close. An astounding 85 percent of public corporations are supplying staff with the devices, and more than 175,000 BlackBerry Enterprise Servers are installed worldwide. The US Congress was RIM's first big client, and Uncle Sam is still the biggest consumer of BlackBerrys. Today, more than 500,000 devices are installed in every department of the U.S. government and throughout the US Senate and House of Representatives.

Some larger corporations are handling tens of thousands of e-mail accounts securely and efficiently, and the top three or four companies each manage close to 100,000 BlackBerry users. Security is key. BlackBerry messages are secured with NATO-grade encryption, and network managers love the ability to freeze or wipe data from a lost or stolen BlackBerry.

The BlackBerry is also super-efficient. Studies show users can boost their productivity by 30 percent, and BlackBerry messaging is compressed, sometimes twenty times more than competing systems, so companies save a bundle in bandwidth costs.

But RIM has also adapted the BlackBerry to serve the consumer as well, and today more than 60 percent of users are outside the enterprise, buying their services from telecom providers.



RIM's original wireless devices were just glorified two-way pagers, used mainly by police, firefighters, and ambulance drivers. But that was a maturing market. When the company added enterprise servers with e-mail, calendars and contact lists to its first BlackBerrys, RIM started to get some real traction on Wall Street and inside the Washington Beltway. RIM co-CEO Jim

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Balsillie was so confident that they had a winner on their hands, he seeded hundreds of those first BlackBerrys to influential users. Soon, a growing number of leading executives, bankers, opinion makers and politicians were adopting the addictive little devices.

Unfortunately for RIM, the BlackBerry was still unknown on Main Street, and growth sputtered. The big telecom providers weren't helping the picture. At the time, they were obsessed with selling their cell phone services, and wireless texting was a distinctly unsexy secondary market.

It took a tragedy to get the BlackBerry to launch velocity, and it happened suddenly, on September 11, 2001.

During the horrific attacks that day in New York and Washington, the only people trapped in the World Trade Center's Twin Towers who were able to contact their loved ones after cell service failed were those with BlackBerrys. Police, firefighters, and ambulance drivers and U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney all used their BlackBerry devices during the crisis.

According to a RIM insider at the time, "During 9/11, RIM staff were PINning [messaging] the hell out of the Mobitex and DataPac networks used by people with BlackBerrys caught in the towers, while the support workers relied on them to communicate even while the regular cell lines were dead. The text network survived while the cell network died because it was barely used and signal strength was possible from remote nodes."*

Throughout the evacuation and collapse of the Twin Towers and during the surge in traffic, Cingular kept its text-only Mobitex network running despite losing many base stations in lower Manhattan. While slow at 12.5 kilobits per second, Mobitex on BlackBerrys kept running while others failed because it did not

*Personal correspondence.

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have to share precious bandwidth with voice. Also, even if an e-mail got delayed because of network congestion, it was queued and sent just a few seconds later.

After 9/11, more and more police and fire departments as well as U.S. federal authorities signed up for BlackBerry services. BlackBerrys also shone during the great 2003 Northeast Blackout and hurricanes Anita and Katrina. But it was in the U.S. Congress where the BlackBerry first gained a serious foothold, when all the politicians and their staffs were given the device, and all the lobbyists and people doing business in Washington followed. Capitol Hill became the first dedicated metropolis on BlackBerry Planet.



RIM's BlackBerry first came to the notice of congressional leaders during 9/11 when poor communications hampered the evacuation of the Capitol building. Washington was literally under attack for the first time since August 1814. It was only by luck that the third plane did not crash into the Capitol or White House. Michigan Representative Fred Upton, who already owned a BlackBerry, was one of the few able to get messages in and out during the chaos. RIM suddenly had a sterling reputation for security, and the U.S. Congress took notice.

A few short weeks later, the October 2001 anthrax scare focused even more attention on BlackBerrys, since Congress had to start sterilizing mail for biological hazards and screening it for bombs. This event delayed regular mail delivery to lawmakers by up to two weeks.

Faced with these two crises, a rattled U.S. Congress promptly spent \$6 million to buy BlackBerry Enterprise Servers and 3,000 devices for all 100 senators, 435 House members, and thousands of staffers. There were really no other contenders, and Capitol Hill

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was soon hooked. Within a few years, Congress had more than 8,200 installed BlackBerrys, and congressional servers were handling more than 25 million e-mail messages a month.

The BlackBerry quickly became a congressional essential. In 2006, Congress panicked and nearly declared a second American Revolution when Judge Spencer in Virginia, trying the NTP patent case against Research In Motion, threatened to shut down the BlackBerry service completely. Members of Congress rose unanimously against any threat to their constitutional right to bear BlackBerrys.

Today, BlackBerrys have become so pervasive in American politics, the show could probably not run without them. New Jersey Representative Scott Garrett, recently interviewed by *Politico*, had this to say about his BlackBerry use:

Garrett: Yeah, today I was without it for about 45 minutes, and the whole time it was like panic.

Politico: I don't understand how members can outright not use one. It almost seems impossible.

Garrett: Well, obviously we did it before there were BlackBerrys.¹

THE AGE OF TELEPOLITICS

U.S. politics today is a fast-moving, lobby-driven profession, and the BlackBerry is a perfect prop and timely tool for lawmakers. In Washington, D.C., every congressional committee meeting is like an electronic trading pit, where competing vote traders watch the action intently, thumbing messages to and from their home offices. And behind every successful politician you'll find an army of BlackBerry toting "telepols," all plugged in to their leader.

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1. Daniel Libit, "The Shuttle: Rep. Scott Garrett," *Politico*, May 16, 2008.

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(Continued)

Florida Representative Adam Putnam, who was part of the first freshman class to be issued a BlackBerry, says that member-to-member messaging is now pretty routine in the House. He says his party's leadership has started e-mailing key materials directly to members each morning, bypassing press people and staff. He feels the handhelds have broadened members' horizons by boosting their comfort level with the Internet: "So, you have members talking about what's on Drudge or Town Hall or Red State." BlackBerrys have "dragged members out of the Dark Ages and into the information age. You now have members conversant about blogs, online news sites, signed up for breaking news alerts. So they're actually less insulated today ... than they were before BlackBerry."²



"Karl Rove has more bandwidth, I think, than any presidential advisor has ever had in history."

—Mark McKinnon, Bush media consultant

The White House installed its first e-mail services under George Bush Senior, but he personally never used them. Now, however, the elder Bush describes himself as a "black belt wireless e-mailer." During Houston Astros' games, he sits behind home plate with his BlackBerry and waves back on TV when he gets e-mails from friends.

Bill Clinton was not a BlackBerry fan and sent only two e-mails during his entire term, preferring to use a secure cell phone and dedicated fax line. Even then, he felt increasingly isolated in the Oval Office, a place he liked to call "the crown jewel of the federal penal system." According to Clinton aide Paul Begala,

2. Daniel Libit, "Are Members BlackBerry Addicts?" *Politico*, June 11, 2008.

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“Presidents can stay in touch with their pre-presidential friends, but they have to work at it. In the pre-BlackBerry age, presidents gave their friends their special, secret ZIP code, listed their names with the White House operator, with instructions to put the calls through, even gave out the cell phone numbers of close aides.”³

George W. Bush was expecting to be the first BlackBerry president, but he had to give his up on assuming office due to concerns about e-mail security and the Presidential Records Act (PRA). The PRA puts each president’s correspondence in the official record and ultimately up for public review or able to be subpoenaed by Congress or the courts. So, three days before Bush’s first inauguration, knowing he was about to be locked into the Oval Office, he sent a mournful message from G94B@aol.com to forty-two friends and relatives that explained his predicament: “Since I do not want my private conversations looked at by those out to embarrass, the only course of action is not to correspond in cyberspace. This saddens me. I have enjoyed conversing with each of you.”

But for Bush’s entourage, some of whom used their Republican National Committee BlackBerrys and e-mail accounts, it was business as usual. During the 2002 election season, Bush’s friend and operative Karl Rove “wore his war room on his belt.” Rove’s BlackBerry held his Rolodex and e-mail system, which he used to flash marching orders to campaign workers and soothe worried lobbyists. Rove was such a BlackBerry devotee that *Time* magazine reported his device had “every appearance of being surgically attached to his hand.”

Rove, a.k.a. “The Boy Genius,” amazed people with his BlackBerry use. “It’s like haiku,” said a friend. Even in the middle of meetings with Bush, Rove would spin the thumbwheel and punch out pithy messages with his big thumbs. “Sometimes

3. Paul Belaga, “Obama Should Keep That BlackBerry,” CNNPolitics.com, January 9, 2009.

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we're in a meeting talking to each other," said a colleague, "and BlackBerrying each other at the same time."⁴

Unfortunately for Rove, his attempt to do an end-run around the PRA by using Republican National Committee e-mail accounts was slammed by a Washington judge, who called it an "apparently flagrant violation of the Presidential Records Act."

George W. Bush's lack of a BlackBerry may have insulated him more than he wanted to be. In *Angler*, Barton Gellman's book about the Cheney vice presidency, Cheney was facing a growing revolt by the Justice Department over warrantless wiretapping, and the acting attorney general finally came to see Bush and told the president he was refusing to go ahead. This crisis had been going on for six weeks, and nobody had been able to tell the president.

Bush was completely shocked when he realized how insulated he had become.

Says journalist Julian Sanchez, "Nobody wants to give the boss unwelcome news, and so the person at the top of the hierarchy often ends up least aware of what's going on. It's all too easy to imagine an online president getting bogged down in an unmanageable flood of correspondence, but there's also clear value in finding some way for folks at a few steps' removed from the inner circle to circumvent the minders and get the attention of the president directly. Maybe it's time for Digg.gov?"⁵

Bush recalled that when he was governor of Texas, "I stayed in touch with all kinds of people around the country, firing off e-mails at all times of the day to stay in touch with my pals." When he returned to private life, says aide Karen Hughes, he immediately signed back on.

Bush's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, was also a BlackBerry addict and called himself "America's first e-governor."

4. James Carney and John F. Dickerson, "W. and the 'Boy Genius,'" *Time*, November 9, 2002.

5. Julian Sanchez, "The First BlackBerry President?" *Ars Technica*, November 24, 2008.

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He listed his e-mail address publicly, and personally answered hundreds of constituent e-mails a day. He feels his administration helped change how the government and people interrelate and helped make Floridians generally more hopeful and optimistic. In December 2006, Jeb Bush unveiled his official portrait at the governor's mansion in Tallahassee. It showed him standing beside a bookshelf, with his personal BlackBerry next to a picture of his family.



"In just the first few weeks, I've had to engage in some of the toughest diplomacy of my life. And that was just to keep my BlackBerry."

—Barack Obama

During the 2008 U.S. election campaign, Barack Obama campaign director David Axelrod got more and more frustrated when team attention wandered away during strategy meetings and participants went into BlackBerry Prayer Position. Even candidate Obama would sneak a peek at his device. So Axelrod came up with a brutal way of dealing with the problem: during work sessions, at the first sign of people getting into position, he ordered all participants, Obama included, to unholster their BlackBerrys and place them in the center of the table.

Obama was the first true BlackBerry candidate. During the campaign, aides did not send him printed stacks of briefing books but rather e-mailed digests to his BlackBerry for review. He looked at longer documents on his laptop computer, putting his editorial changes in red type. He also relied on his BlackBerry to keep the home fires burning, e-mailing his wife and daughters constantly. And before bed, he played a few games of BrickBreaker to unwind; reports say the president's high score is around 15,000.

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Right after Obama's election win, he replied to a friend's congratulatory e-mail from his BlackBerry with the line "How about that?"

Ultimately, Obama had to face the same BlackBerry issues as George W. Bush. Even though he was elected in "the most technologically sophisticated presidential campaign in history," the Secret Service told Obama he would have to give up his BlackBerry for security reasons, once installed as chief executive. Hackers around the world would rise to the challenge of getting into the e-mail of the most important smartphone on Earth—look how easily amateur hackers got into Sarah Palin's personal e-mail account (gov.palin@yahoo.com) during the election campaign. Also, every word a president generated by way of correspondence had to be archived. Finally, the White House was heavily protected by an electronic security field, and wireless didn't work too well inside.

"Imagine you're Barack Obama," said Michael Agger in *Slate*. "Your operatives played social media like a fiddle while coordinating field operations via text message, e-mail blast, and iPhone app. You proved yourself to be a modern info-executive with your 3 a.m. e-mails and your preference for reviewing docs on your BlackBerry . . . Now, you're preparing to enter the White House, and your BlackBerry is about to be ripped from your clutches."⁶

Said Obama advisor Linda Douglas, "Given how important it is for him to get unfiltered information from as many sources as possible, I can imagine he will miss that freedom." Campaign manager David Plouffe said that losing his BlackBerry would be more than just an inconvenience for Obama: "It's an important way for him to operate with his colleagues, but also it's very important for him to stay in touch with . . . his friends and his family. It's

6. Michael Agger, "Luddite in Chief: Why Barack Obama Should Keep His BlackBerry," *Slate*, November 21, 2008.

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something he's really struggling with. He does live his life through technology."⁷

Barack Obama had the guts to quit smoking during the election campaign; now the most powerful man on the planet was told he was going to have to go cold turkey on his "BlackBerry" as well. No doubt his wife, Michelle, had mixed feelings. An amateur video clip taken in Chicago showed her slapping her husband's hand when he took his BlackBerry from his holster to check his e-mail during his daughter's soccer game. He quickly put it back. Later in the game, the clip showed him patting his holster absent-mindedly but not daring to pull out the device.

Obama was well aware he would have a harder time kicking his BlackBerry addiction, and in a post-election interview with Barbara Walters, he said that he was trying to find a way to keep both his BlackBerry and personal e-mail account:

One of the things that I'm going to have to work through is how to break through the isolation, the bubble that exists around the president. And I'm in the process of negotiating with the Secret Service, with lawyers, with White House staff . . . to figure out how can I get information from outside of the 10 or 12 people who surround my office in the White House. Because one of the worst things I think that can happen to a president is losing touch with the struggles that people are going through every day.

Some commentators felt that breaking his BlackBerry habit would be a good thing for Obama. Would the United States have wanted a BlackBerry president anyway, and a self-confessed CrackBerry addict to boot? Some studies show that BlackBerry-wielding

7. Jeff Zeleny, "Lose the BlackBerry? Yes He Can, Maybe," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2008.

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multitaskers end up performing each task a bit more poorly since they are afflicted by “continuous partial attention.” Better a president who can concentrate on one crisis at a time.

But Obama continued to resist, even after his inauguration, and senior advisor David Axelrod told ABC News: “He’s pretty determined.”

In a *New York Times* interview, Obama told John Harwood: “I’m still clinging to my BlackBerry. They’re going to pry it out of my hands.”

HARWOOD: Well, are you, in fact, going to overcome this idea as anachronistic that presidents can’t use the most modern ...

President-elect OBAMA: Well, here’s what I think I can get. I think I’m going to be able to get access to a computer somewhere. It may not be right in the Oval Office. The second thing I’m hoping to do is to see if there’s some way that we can arrange for me to continue to have access to a BlackBerry. I know that ...

HARWOOD: As of this moment, you still have your BlackBerry.

President-elect OBAMA: As of this moment, I still do. This is a concern, I should add, not just of Secret Service, but also lawyers. You know, this town’s full of lawyers. I don’t know if you’ve noticed ...

HARWOOD: Yeah.

President-elect OBAMA: ... and they have a lot of opinions. And so I’m still in a scuffle around that, but it—look, it’s the hardest thing about being president ...

President-elect OBAMA: I don’t know that I’ll win, but I’m still—I’m still fighting it. And—but here’s the point I was making, I guess, is that it’s not just the flow

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of information. I mean, I can get somebody to print out clips for me, and I can read newspapers. What it has to do with is having mechanisms where you are interacting with people who are outside of the White House in a meaningful way. And I've got to look for every opportunity to do that—ways that aren't scripted, ways that aren't controlled, ways where, you know, people aren't just complimenting you or standing up when you enter into a room, ways of staying grounded. And if I can manage that over the next four years, I think that will help me serve the American people better because I'm going to be hearing their voices. They're not going to be muffled as a consequence of me being in the White House.⁸

In a third interview with John King on CNN, Obama was a little more belligerent about hanging on to his BlackBerry. "I think we're going to be able to beat this back," he said. "I think we're going to be able to hang on to one of these."

Obama said he would be careful about how he used the device: "Now, my working assumption, and this is not new, is that everything I write on e-mail could end up being on CNN. So I make sure that—to think before I press 'send.'"

Describing his BlackBerry as "just one tool among a number of tools that I'm trying to use, to break out of the bubble," the yet-to-be-inaugurated Democrat said he wanted "to make sure that people can still reach me. But if I'm doing something stupid, somebody in Chicago can send me an e-mail and say, 'What are you doing?' You know? Or 'you're too detached' or 'you're not listening to what is going on here in the neighborhood.' I want to

8. John Harwood, "John Harwood Interviews Barack Obama," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2009.

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be able to have voices, other than the people who are immediately working for me, be able to reach out and—and send me a message about what’s happening in America.”⁹

PRICELESS PUBLICITY

All this “will he or won’t he” commentary about Barack Obama’s BlackBerry was a godsend for RIM.

Doug Shabelman is president of Burns Entertainment, which arranges deals between celebrities and companies. He estimates the worldwide publicity value of the president’s struggles to keep his beloved Verizon BlackBerry 8830 World Edition Curve on assuming office at about \$50 million. “He’s consistently seen using it and consistently in the news arguing—and arguing with issues of national security and global welfare—how he absolutely needs this to function on a daily basis. . . . Think about how far the company has come if they’re able to say, ‘The president has to have this to keep in touch.’”

Laura Ries, president of marketing-strategy firm Ries & Ries and co-author of four books on brands and marketing, pegs the publicity value to RIM at more than \$100 million a year if Obama were able to make product endorsements. That would top the marketing take of Tiger Woods, she said. “How often does a president get photographed? Every five minutes. The potential of him being in a photo using a BlackBerry in all likelihood is incredibly high. That would be very powerful.”

A big chunk of the public sympathized with Obama’s problem. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* poll, 50 percent of respondents said “NO” when asked whether Obama should have to give up his BlackBerry, and 24 percent argued he should keep it to create a

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9. “Obama Plans to Keep His BlackBerry,” Hindu News Update Service, January 17, 2009.

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record of his presidential doings. A further 18 percent said he'll be too busy with other matters to bother with checking his e-mail.

Lori Sale, head of artist marketing at the Paradigm Talent Agency, says that the fact Barack Obama was not paid to promote his BlackBerry is even better for Research In Motion. "What makes it even more valuable than that is how authentic it is," she said.

Fran Kelly, CEO of ad agency Arnold Worldwide, said that Obama's tacit endorsement worked both ways. While he did a lot for the BlackBerry brand, the smartphone boosted Obama's image in turn. "The BlackBerry anecdotes are a huge part of Mr. Obama's brand reputation," he said. "It positions him as one of us: he's got friends and family and people to communicate with just like all of us. And it positions him as a next-generation politician."^{*}

John McCain suffered in comparison, when he confessed to reporters that he didn't know how to check e-mail and relied on his wife for computing. On the other hand, his running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, "governs by BlackBerry." She has two devices and confesses she "feels naked without her BlackBerrys."¹⁰



"President Barack Hussein Obama has changed everything about America already—not just by being what he is but by being who he is. He is not just the first black president. He is the first BlackBerry president."

—Tina Brown

^{*} For BlackBerry, Obama's Devotion is Priceless, by Stephanie Clifford. *New York Times*, January 8, 2009; also Clayton Harrison, BlackBerry flattered, but it'd be easier if Obama let gadget go," *Bloomberg News*, Jan. 17, 2009

10. Ross Douthat, "The Palin Record: One More Look", *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2008.

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Even after the inauguration, Obama transition co-chair John Podesta kept up the spin, putting Obama's need to connect on a higher plane. "Obama's politics are interactive, solutions-oriented and open to the citizens," he said. Obama's BlackBerry enhanced his decision-making by helping him reach outside his inner circle. "Let the man have his BlackBerry," Podesta declared. "An off-line Obama isn't just bad for Barack. It's bad for all of us."

Others argued that the 1978 Presidential Records Act was obsolete in light of thirty years of information technology (IT) advancement. Congress needed to hold hearings to update the law rather than puzzle over whether it applied to e-mail and messaging.

Still others suggested that President Obama use other National Security Agency-approved smartphones, such as General Dynamics' Sectera Edge or the new Guardian from L-3 Communications. But there's a learning curve with switching to a new operating system. Some said that the phone was the major security problem.

The Secret Service and National Security Agency saw that the main danger to the president lay with the cellular radio in the device, which constantly syncs with nearby wireless networks so calls can be routed to the phone. If bad guys ever got access to the cell phone systems that handled Obama's BlackBerry, they might be able to ping his smartphone to a wireless tower and track his movements. Or they could scan cellular frequencies over several days to triangulate his exact position, even down to one of several identical limousines, even though they could not decode the AES-128 encrypted BlackBerry data.

So, maybe RIM could supply the president with a more secure PIN device only?

Obama's BlackBerry battle was priceless PR for RIM in the short run. But Roger Entner, an analyst with market researcher Nielsen Co. in Boston, said the device would be a magnet for spies, and "a significant share of Russia's signal intelligence and China's signal

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intelligence and cyber intelligence budgets would be targeted to break it.” This would put RIM’s “sterling” reputation at risk.¹¹

Security expert Bruce Schneier said about Obama, “Look, he can decide to paint the White House blue if he wants. The Internet is the greatest generation gap since rock and roll The NSA will tell you the risks, but they will never say here’s what the benefits are.” Obama might be productive and effective with a BlackBerry, but the risk of hacking the presidential BlackBerry is high, and, in any event, it is not possible to have absolute certainty that e-mail actually came from Obama. “No encryption program solves that,” he said.¹²

Gartner security analyst John Pescatore said the problem was switching to unclassified mode to use the regular Internet. “Internet e-mail is totally unacceptable for a president to use,” Pescatore said. “There is no strong authentication—how can anyone prove an e-mail came from the president? There is no integrity—how can anyone prove the content wasn’t changed?” And use of encryption “doesn’t stop anyone from forwarding an e-mail from him outside that closed loop.”

Obama advisor John Podesta urged him to find a work-around to satisfy the security team: “They’d keep you in a lead container in the basement if you let them.”

In the end, presidential security could not trump Barack Obama’s BlackBerry addiction, and he didn’t have to kick his tech habit, at least not entirely. He won the battle to keep his beloved BlackBerry, albeit a crippled “custom” version without a phone, for personal use only, that connected through a secure base station. His address would change regularly, and friends could not forward his e-mails or send him attachments. The National Security Agency

11. Crayton Harrison (Bloomberg News), “BlackBerry to Obama: Thanks, Now Lose It,” *Rocky Mountain News*, January 13, 2009.

12. Bruce Schneier, “Why Obama Should Keep His BlackBerry-But Won’t,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2008.

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also limited his address list to an elite group of West Wing staffers, family, and friends, who were all given security briefings. He and his wife, Michelle, insisted on family contact. Vice President Joe Biden has access to Obama, as do White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, advisors David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett, and press secretary Robert Gibbs. It is not known whether Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, talk show diva Oprah Winfrey, or actor Scarlett Johansson have the president's ear or thumb.¹³

For any phone calls in the wild, President Obama first had to use the clunky but powerful \$3,350 Sectera Edge made under special contract by General Dynamics, which has dedicated channels not on the public cell networks. In June 2009, he took delivery of a custom BlackBerry 8830 running special SecureVoice encryption software developed by Washington DC tech firm The Genesis Key, in concert with RIM. The software scrambles phone calls, emails and text messages to the highest possible level required by the NSA. But it can be used only to hook up with other BlackBerrys running the same encryption software. And the President may have to wait up to 50 minutes for an email reply, since the system actively sniffs out incoming messages for viruses or Trojan horses.

The Presidential Records Act says anything President Obama e-mails, IMs, and PINs will have historic value and must be saved. But historians will have to wait as long as twenty years to read them.



While Washington learned to cope, similar BlackBerry tensions also arose in other democratic assemblies around the world. Canada, home base of the BlackBerry, was not immune. In May 2004, the speaker of the Ontario Legislature in Toronto, Alvin Curling, told

13. Peter Baker, "Symbol of Elite Access," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2009.

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the members that the use of BlackBerrys had “gotten out of hand, especially since the electronic devices are prohibited.” Curling declared a “war on CrackBerrys” when he saw a minister reading a statement off her BlackBerry.¹⁴

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is a political town, chock-full of BlackBerry addicts. Overall, the city shares with Washington, D.C., a kind of frantic machismo about using the device. Prime Minister Stephen Harper does not use a BlackBerry, but his staffers and most other politicians on Parliament Hill are dependent. All Members of Parliament (MPs) and their staffs are given four BlackBerrys by the office of the Speaker of the House.

Former Liberal MP and financial author Garth Turner is a self-confessed connection junkie, who sleeps with his BlackBerry next to his bed. Turner particularly hates long flights when his precious device no longer works. “Traveling is hard enough,” he says, “but traveling without your BlackBerry vibrating reassuringly on your hip is absolute digital hell.”¹⁵

Durham MP Mark Holland says he felt “phantom vibrations” when away from his device for three days, and notes that there is a BlackBerry-driven “subconversation” going on all the time in committee and in the House. There is also an “emergent BlackBerry etiquette,” where it’s okay to use the device, even at a dinner, when everybody else is also tapping away, but it’s important to be aware if there are any non-addicts in the room who might be insulted.

But there are islands of sanity on Parliament Hill. All parties ask their MPs to check their BlackBerrys at the door of caucus meetings, and the Liberal Party caucus even went so far as to pass a rule banning them outright. You can also find a few people off the Hill with some decent perspective on RIM’s invention and how it ought to be used.

14. “Sour Grapes over MPPs’ BlackBerrys,” *Toronto Star*, May 3, 2004.

15. Harris MacLeod, “Call Them CrackBerrys,” *Hill Times*, June 2, 2008.

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Dick Fadden is former Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in the government of Canada.* Fadden became a hero to his department and to scores of government employees when in January 2008 he banned BlackBerry use for business from seven o'clock at night and on weekends. Well, not exactly *banned*. Fadden called the new policy "*operating rules*," designed to help "attack some of the stresses around work":

- BlackBerry blackout between the hours of 7:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. and on weekends and holidays;
- Meetings should not be held during the lunch hour;
- BlackBerrys should not be used during meetings;
- Meetings should start and finish on time as a means of managing workloads.**

I visited Fadden a year after the famous memo and asked him whether the policy had any effect. Right away he said, "Look, we consider the BlackBerry has great value in the department. It's a useful tool and boosts productivity. But it has to be managed."

I asked him whether he had done any analysis of the BlackBerry blackout. He said he brought it up regularly with his managers and found "the main result was a major drop in the amount of e-mail delivered in the department. Although it is creeping up again."

How did Fadden manage his own personal use as a senior public servant? He said he never uses e-mail on his BlackBerry, but only PINs or sends messages for security. E-mail stays on his PC. He turns his off at eleven at night, but of course he still has to be available for emergencies by phone 24/7.

* In June, 2009, he was appointed head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)

** See Fadden's memo on the *BlackBerry Planet* Web Support site under Texts and Documents.

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Fadden says public reaction to his policy was mixed. Some newspaper letter writers said he should “get a life” or “join the 21st Century.” One senior manager sniffed that the BlackBerry blackout was “a stupid decision that pretends to deal with the real issue of workload and stress. So would we have banned telephones on bureaucrats’ desks at the turn of the century?”¹⁶

But overall the policy struck a nerve. People in Fadden’s department were clearly suffering under the onslaught of e-mail and the expectation of always being on. They knew they needed to manage their addiction and attack their BlackBerry abuse. One employee told CTV News, “We’re feeling the pressure trying to get a lot of stuff done in a short period of time and the fact that they’re recognizing our families are suffering the consequences of it, I think it’s a great idea.”¹⁷

I asked Fadden why these kinds of operating rules were not more popular and why they weren’t government policy across the board. He said other departments were bringing in similar guidelines to a greater or lesser extent, but that it was not something that should be imposed from above. Policies had to be tailored to each department, and managers had to be convinced they were useful in their particular cases.

Fadden acknowledged his measures might seem a “bit artificial” to some. Obviously you had to be flexible and recognize that some meetings had to go on longer or you had to keep your BlackBerry on at critical times. But finding ways to respect the needs of employees to balance their work and life was worth it. And the very fact of having a policy—not a ban—still makes people aware of the dangers and time-wasting if they don’t respect others in the amount of e-mail they send.

16. “‘BlackBerry Blackout’ Imposed on PS,” *Ottawa Citizen*, February 1, 2008.

17. “Immigration Canada Calls for BlackBerry Blackout,” CTV.ca, February 1, 2008.

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Linda Duxbury, a professor at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business in Ottawa, hailed Fadden's move as "visionary" since, in her opinion, many people in the public service were too "wired" to do their jobs efficiently and productively. "Good for him, it's the kind of leadership the public service needs, and this is leadership because he's doing something that is not easy. The whole public service revolves around the BlackBerry and being available 24/7 and he's the first to go beyond talking about balance."



Queen Elizabeth II is a thoroughly modern, high-tech monarch. She gets a buzz from her Royal BlackBerry, a gift from Vodafone. She is by all accounts only moderately addicted and gives trusted reporters a business card with her e-mail address. Apparently it's not oneself@houseofwindsor.uk.

The Queen got her first mobile phone in 2001 but never uses it in public. She also banned her staff from using them while on duty at Buckingham Palace, Balmoral, Sandringham, and Windsor Castle. Several waiters and butlers were nearly sent off for beheading when they were caught fumbling with their ringing phones during an official banquet for a foreign dignitary.

As befitting her regal status, the Queen normally dictates replies to an aide rather than writing them herself. However, Buck House insiders say she does use her handheld to send short messages to Princes William and Harry, who taught her how to text.

The eighty-three-year-old Queen was turned on to BlackBerrys in 2005 by her son Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, who equipped himself and his staff with the devices. Her Majesty already owned an Apple iPod, which she filled with patriotic tunes such as "Land of Hope and Glory" and other favorites from *The Last Night of the*

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Proms. In 2007, she delivered her Christmas Day message for the first time as an MP3 podcast.

The Palace, like any other well run business, is now properly equipped with a secure BES and BlackBerrys to enable members of the Royal Family and their staff to keep in discrete but constant touch with their offices while out and about on official engagements.

The Duke of York himself is a technology fanatic and regularly attends conferences. He is enthusiastic about BlackBerry innovations, and in 2008, he joined Mike Lazaridis to officially open the new U.K. headquarters of Research In Motion in Slough, England.

Apparently “By Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen” still rules the waves, the electromagnetic ones.



Across the Channel in France, it was another story. President Nicholas Sarkozy clearly had a problem with his BlackBerry manners. By 2007, he was becoming known as “the King of Bling” for his serious attachment to clunky watches, Ray-Ban aviators, and obsessive BlackBerry use. The French were shocked when he risked offending Pope Benedict by sneaking a peek at his BlackBerry during an audience with the pontiff. Presumably it was an urgent call from his gorgeous new lady, now his wife, Italian model and singer Carla Bruni.

By early 2008, Sarkozy’s popularity ratings had plummeted, and he was forced by his advisors to adjust his lifestyle before a state visit to England to visit Queen Elizabeth. With this excursion, the rebranded and “re-presidentialized” Sarkozy soon redeemed himself in the eyes of the French. He and Madame Bruni appeared in understated yet elegant couture befitting a head of state and consort. The notoriously impatient president’s BlackBerry was

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nowhere to be seen, and his ratings recovered as he re-emerged as a leader of “elegance and discretion.”¹⁸



“According to the emerging etiquette of the online era, it’s the height of rudeness to take out your handheld device and check your emails while friends or colleagues are talking. But what if they’ve been talking for seven hours?”

—Oliver Burkeman, *The Guardian*

Downsides to BlackBerry politics are emerging. For one thing, BlackBerrys are now the new techno-crib sheet, allowing handlers to provide real-time feedback to their politicians. In the 2004 U.S. election, Senate Democratic candidate Representative Peter Deutsch was caught checking his device during a live-TV debate in Florida. He said, “He was getting words of encouragement from his staff and only checked it during commercials.” WPTV producer Tom Kastanotis said he will consider asking candidates not to wear or hold BlackBerrys during debates in the future.¹⁹

Another downside to BlackBerry use can be obsession with the device over the job. During the 2008 Democratic leadership campaign, it emerged that Hillary Clinton’s staffers were spending more time relating to the media and interfacing with star reporters than promoting the fortunes of their candidate.

New York Democratic National Committee member Robert Zimmerman, a prominent Clinton supporter, publicly grumbled that “Hillary Clinton has a very powerful populist message about issues that impact people’s lives, and it’s being undermined by all these group therapy discussions the campaign staff is having with the media.”

18. Henry Samuel, “Nicolas Sarkozy to Shed ‘King of Bling’ Image,” *Telegraph*, March 18, 2008.

19. Margaret Kane, “BlackBerry Season in Florida Politics,” CNET, August 6, 2004.

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“The most important innovation this campaign could pursue,” said Zimmerman, “is confiscating all the BlackBerrys so they do their jobs.”²⁰

The Washington obsession with BlackBerrys is even spreading onto the august floor of the U.S. Senate, where members now openly flaunt the ban on electronic devices. In 2005, Sergeant at Arms Bill Pickle warned that “These devices are not only disruptive to the legislative business on the Senate floor, but they cause interference with the chamber’s audio system.” However, only two years later, in December 2007, Missouri Senator Christopher “Kit” Bond was caught glancing repeatedly at his BlackBerry as he delivered his oration, marking the first time anyone in the chamber had seen a fellow member of Congress reading his speech directly from a PDA.

It’s not just e-mail any more. It’s Google. Senators are using the BlackBerry as an instant information tool. *The Washington Post* described the scene on Valentine’s Day 2008:

In the presiding officer’s chair, Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) read a briefing book during a vote but had his BlackBerry next to the binder, dutifully checking the device infamously known by Capitol Hill staff as a “CrackBerry.” Menendez took the precaution of lowering his BlackBerry onto his lap so his colleagues couldn’t see him typing.

Even senior staff openly use their BlackBerrys these days. Yesterday, the top Republican floor adviser, David Schiappa, used his to conduct quick research in response to a question from Sen. Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine).²¹

Congressional activities are getting more and more virtual. In April 2008, Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan.), a self proclaimed “BlackBerry hound,” used his BlackBerry to e-mail his chief of

20. Ben Smith, “Hillary Banks on a Game-Changing Event,” *Politico*, March 4, 2008.

21. Mary Ann Akers and Paul Kane, “BlackBerrys in Hand, Senators Thumb Their Noses at Ban,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2008.

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staff from his seat at the Papal Mass at the Washington Nationals' ballpark to change the language of a resolution welcoming Pope Benedict XVI, since the wording had offended Senator Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.).

Brownback loves how his BlackBerry cuts down meeting time and workload but says, "I do see it as distracting at times. When you're in meetings and you get hit with a BlackBerry message and you get so trained to respond to the jolt at your side, I see it as distracting people, and in a way that is not very mannerly."²²



The Mother of Parliaments in Westminster was not immune to the BlackBerry dilemma either. In February 2005, Michael Martin, the speaker of the British House of Commons, issued a ruling that MPs would be ejected from the chamber if they used their BlackBerrys or other handheld devices during debate. He also cautioned members against using hidden earpieces.

Speakers and their deputies had long frowned on the use of electronic devices in the Commons chamber, and the chirp of a mobile or pager could result in a strong rebuke or ejection by the sergeant at arms. At the time, messaging in and out of the chamber during debates was restricted to slips of paper passed by lackeys wearing black tail-coated uniforms.

Speaker Martin's raspberry to the BlackBerry came one day after he spied several MPs tapping on their BlackBerrys during debates. When questioned by the press, most MPs agreed with his ruling, although Labour MP Sir Peter Soulsby later admitted, "Many of us use them rather covertly, both in committees and in the chamber."

Yet only two years later, it was clear to the speaker that a boundary line had been crossed. He was finding his 2005 dictate

22. Daniel Libit, "Are Members BlackBerry Addicts?" *Politico*, June 11, 2008.

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too hard to enforce—more and more members seemed lost in prayer during the most long-winded speeches, and he knew exactly what that meant.

Finally, in 2007, the Commons Modernisation Committee asked the speaker to allow handheld devices in the Commons “so backbenchers could make better use of their time.” Most agreed with committee chair Jack Straw, who said that “lengthy speeches and long waits before being called upon to ask a question can mean backbench MPs are left twiddling their thumbs for hours. And that boredom leads to low morale and may even be discouraging some MPs from attending parliamentary debates.” His report, entitled *Revitalising the Chamber: The Role of the Back Bencher*, concluded that “The use of handheld devices to keep up to date with emails should be permitted in the chamber provided that it causes no disturbance.”

On October 29, 2007, after three hours of debate, the members voted seventy-four votes to thirty-six to allow handheld use in the House of Commons.

Meanwhile, in Norway, where BlackBerrys and other PDAs are allowed, one bored parliamentarian was censured after he was found playing BrickBreaker on his BlackBerry during a debate on Norway’s military action in Afghanistan. So, apparently e-mailing in Parliament is okay these days, but entertaining yourself is definitely not.



“Technology is part of our bodies. Electric technology is directly related to our central nervous systems . . . Those parts of ourselves that we thrust out in the form of new invention are attempts to counter or neutralize collective pressures and irritations. But this counter irritant usually proves a greater plague than the initial irritant, like a drug habit.”

—Marshall McLuhan

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In Washington, world capital of workaholism, many young professionals find BlackBerrys a godsend. They're proud of their capacity for suffering, for not having a life off the Hill, and for their 24/7 work culture, and the BlackBerry is a big part of that culture. But in that same Washington milieu that has so enthusiastically adopted BlackBerrys, there are signs of dissent, and they come from more senior politicians and pundits. Some are arguing that the device has put too much power of access in the hands of donors, lobbyists, and friends, with a hotline to the member's BlackBerry, while regular constituents have to e-mail a general inbox.

Former Oklahoma Representative Mickey Edwards, who now lectures on government at Princeton University, thinks all the constant input from linked-in constituents makes partisan politics worse. "It's just going to lock you in tighter and tighter to your preconceived positions. It works toward more polarization."

Steve Frantzich, a professor of political science at the U.S. Naval Academy, says handheld usage "reduces George Washington's 'cooling saucer' by allowing members less time for deliberation and more tendency to respond without much thinking." Having a BlackBerry makes a member of Congress "always 'on,' with little downtime or little ability to say, 'I don't know.'"

"They're not really free agents anymore," adds former House historian Raymond Smock. "They're captives of whoever contacts them next."²³

Other Capitol Hill BlackBerry users feel that this new technology is enslaving them even as it sets them free. On the one hand, most love to feel untethered and free with mobile smartphones such as the BlackBerry. But many also hate it when e-mail interrupts their lives, shackling them to a new ball and chain when they feel compelled to use them wherever and whenever.

23. Ibid.

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So they grumble that BlackBerrys have become wireless leashes that bind them to work off hours, whether they like it or not. “I still believe the premise that someone in my position is entitled to some personal time,” said one U.S. Defense Department employee. “I’ve had guys say they’d kill for one, but I don’t like the fact that I am electronically tethered twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”²⁴

While Barack Obama treasures his BlackBerry as a way to stay connected with the outside world, others welcome any excuse to ditch the device and go on an enforced digital holiday. In April 2007, when RIM’s North American networks went down for ten hours, one major investment bank warned that important deals might fall through. But many other users breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for the break from their BlackBerry shackles.

The smarter BlackBerry users in government learn that the key is knowing when to turn it off, when to avoid being *always on*. Some leaders have taken direct action to give people a break. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty banned BlackBerrys from Cabinet meetings, saying that “It’s really hard to receive information and be thoughtful at the same time.” Others have instituted “BlackBerry blackout.”

The wisest of Washington’s wireless warriors know there is a time and a place for everything. D.C.’s exclusive Metropolitan Club, “incorporated for literary, mutual improvement and social purposes,” lets its members cope with the surrounding Sahara of silicon by offering a green digital oasis and watering hole. The club rules state simply that members and their guests must not take notes at the tables or use their BlackBerrys.

So how did a device such as the BlackBerry become so addictive that managers actually need to control its uses and abuses? The best place to look for clues is in the story of the BlackBerry’s birth and early development.

24. Alina Tugend, “Blackberry Jam,” *Government Executive*, November 1, 2004.

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