Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns were game changers in using digital technology to identify likely voters, raise money online, and create a grassroots movement to elect a president.

Now, one of the top digital leaders from Obama's tech team wants to use the same principles from the campaigns to help nonprofits and other social impact organizations organize communities to help change the world.

Timshel—founded by 2008 Obama for America CTO Michael Slaby—is officially out of stealth and ready to give organizations with a social purpose the tools to build a stronger digital strategy.

Chicago-based Timshel has been quietly building its product The Groundwork since 2013, following Obama’s re-election campaign (Slaby was Obama's chief integration and innovation officer in 2012). The Groundwork is Timshel's platform that gives organizations and brands more powerful digital tools to help them organize supporters, get their message out, and raise money. Slaby realized that if technology could play a role in electing a president, those same ideas could be used by the social impact community to raise awareness and galvanize people around a cause.

"What we discovered (during the Obama campaign) was this potential for digital and data to be a phenomenal force multiplier for building a community and activating people at scale," Slaby said.

"Coming off of the second campaign in 2013, we looked out at the social impact community and this incredible world of abundance that we live in, and we believe that we can be making more progress. We have the technology and innovation and passion and resources to be solving more of our biggest challenges."

Timshel has around 20 clients, Slaby said, including the **UN Refugee Agency** (USA for UNHCR) and **Fabretto**, a US nonprofit that serves underprivileged children in Nicaragua.
But Timshel defines social impact organizations very broadly, Slaby said, and the startup works with big brands that have mission driven initiatives, as well as political campaigns looking for some of the same magic Obama used in ’08 and ’12.

Hillary Clinton is currently using The Groundwork in her campaign, and according to Quartz has paid more than $170,000 to use the startup’s services in 2015.

Slaby wouldn’t comment on the specifics of the partnership, but confirmed that the Clinton campaign is “using The Groundwork as part of their digital infrastructure.”

“I think the things they see in our toolset are the things that are, in some ways, a head start,” Slaby said. “It’s this extremely flexible platform that allows them to build on other things with confidence, in super high performance and stability that’s hard to find in other tools.”

Slaby wouldn’t talk about how much money Timshel has raised or who its investors are, but according to Quartz the startup is funded at least in part by Eric Schmidt, the chairman of Google’s parent company Alphabet, who reportedly sees The Groundwork as an important tool in helping Clinton win the White House.

But Slaby said politics is only a small piece of what Timshel does, although the startup is “talking to a couple other campaigns.” Mostly, Timshel works with nonprofits and NGOs to help them drive their social mission and engage with their communities.

The USA for UNHCR, for example, is working with Timshel to use digital technology to better engage with the American public and build a community of supporters to do things like advocate more effectively for resettlement policies. Essentially, they say to Slaby: How can we do what Obama did?

“We get that question a lot,” Slaby said. “What [The Groundwork] has given them is an incredible flexibility to create lots of digital experiences to engage people in less obvious ways.”

Those digital experiences can take many different forms, depending on the needs of the organization, Slaby said. It could be about increasing online signups, delivering more effective advertising, collecting donations online, or organizing grassroot events and hosting community house parties.

"With the Groundwork’s flexible API, we are able to customize and deliver digital experiences across all our strategic segments, and power all sorts of different engagement efforts," Brian Reich, Director of The Hive, a special projects unit at USA for UNHCR, said in an emailed statement. "In five months, we have grown our base of supporters, but more importantly, we have opened up entirely new ways of thinking about how to educate and activate supporters to help drive impact in support of refugees around the world."

Timshel also provides data analytics to for-profit companies so they can quantify their social impact initiatives and understand how effectively their time and money was spent. Timshel helps businesses understand how their philanthropic and mission-driven programs impact things like employee retention rates and brand loyalty, which in turn are helpful metrics to show investors.

Slaby said ideal Timshel clients are organizations that are ambitious about building a community and increasing their digital tools to do so. These organizations already have at least a small digital team, which could integrate The Groundwork API into its experience.

Timshel has around 50 employees and has offices in Chicago and New York. It’s is one of several Chicago startups that have spawned out of Obama’s tech team. Civis Analytics, Public Good, and Modest (which was acquired by PayPal) have all been launched by founders who previously spent time working at the campaign’s Chicago headquarters.

Down the road, Slaby said Timshel hopes to work with any social impact organization, regardless of its digital presence, to use data to build communities and promote its message.

“Eventually we want the entire social impact community to be able to leverage these tools regardless of size or scale,” Slaby said. “(It will be) an interface where a digital strategist can log in and create an account, donations pages, and be up and running without any technical background.”
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